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E3 In Danger? It Shouldn't Be

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

Call it a humblebrag, but I've been to every E3 since it began in 1995 – all 22 of them. I've seen the show change over the years, and I have seen the show falter. The dark year when we were in Santa Monica and another year where we shared the convention center were particularly bad. At that show games were relegated to the back rooms, and arts and crafts took the center stage.

No offense to arts and crafts, but video games should not lose out to the craft business. But this year saw turmoil return to the Electronic Entertainment Expo. Some believe the show should be open to the public and be about engaging the gamer, others think it should stay focused on being an industry-facing event.

This year both Electronic Arts and Activision – giant third party publishers – were largely absent from the show floor and the difference was noticeable. The hall with Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony were hotbeds of activity. The hall where EA and Activision normally set up shop? Not so much. On top of this, I heard rumors that both Microsoft and Sony felt they would benefit from having their own events rather than being part of a larger industry event.

I have my fair share of problems with E3, but the last thing in the world I want is to see it go away. Do I have ideas on how to make it better? You bet, but if the game companies walk away we lose the one moment when video games are at the center of the world's stage. When we see the future of games. When we learn how they will change our lives. When the best-of-the-best face off in a marketing blitz that sets the stage for the coming year and beyond.

Let's not lose this important part of the video game ecosystem, but it is time for a change to E3. My hope is that the powers that be can look past their own budgets and reservations and make next year's already announced E3 one of the best ever, where all the video game industry comes together to celebrate games.

Enjoy the issue.

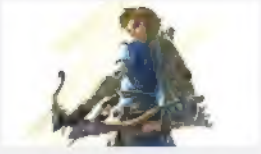
Cheers,

28 Game Informer's E3 Hot 50

This year's E3 had fewer show-stopping surprises, but what we lost in crazy reveals and overblown YouTube reaction videos, we gained in hefty looks at games that aren't too far from release. We combed through all the games we saw and played and tested our friendships to craft a ranked list of the games we think are worth getting excited about.

12 The E3 Microsoft Report Card
Microsoft announced not one, but two new consoles this year.

14 The E3 Sony Report Card
Sony was full of surprises, revealing God of War and a new game from Kojima.

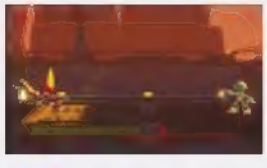


16 The E3 Nintendo Report Card
Nintendo went all in on The Legend of Zelda, for better or worse.

04 **Feedback**
18 **The E3 VR Report**
24 **Gear: The Best Tech Of E3**
26 **Timeline**
28 **E3 Hot 50**
84 **Reviews**
96 **Game Over: E3 Missing In Action**

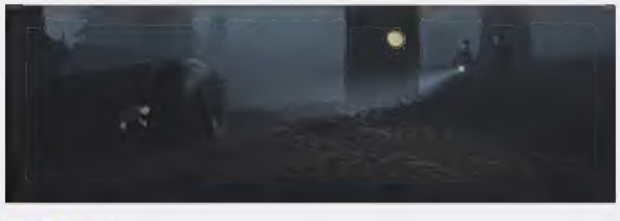
20 The Most Fascinating Trailers Of E3
We gathered up the best trailers of the show and spoke with Hideo Kojima about his mysterious new title, Death Stranding.

86 Dangerous Golf
Burnout creators' new game trades cars for golf balls.



87 Mighty No. 9
The Mega Man creator's spiritual successor isn't quite what we hoped for.

89 Mirror's Edge Catalyst
Does the open world help or hinder Faith's follow-up parkour adventure?



90 Inside
Playdead's latest is a beautiful, playable nightmare that shouldn't be missed.

92 Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE
This RPG mash-up isn't what we expected, but it's good.

games index

1979 Revolution: Black Friday 94
Abzû 52
Batman: A Telltale Series 62
Batman: Arkham VR 18, 73
Battle Chasers: Nightwar 73
Battlefield 1 42
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night 72
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare 40
Civilization VI 41
Crackdown 3 96
Dangerous Golf 86
Days Gone 47
Dead Island 2 96
Dead Rising 4 43
Death Stranding 20
Detroit: Become Human 63
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided 61
Dishonored 2 34
Edge of Nowhere 91
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Special Edition, The 22
Elder Scrolls Legends, The 79
Ever Oasis 81
FIFA 17 70
Final Fantasy VII Remake 97
Final Fantasy XV 56
For Honor 57
Forza Horizon 3 68
Friday the 13th: The Game 22
Gears of War 4 46
Ghost Recon: Wildlands 53
God of War 29
Gwent: The Witcher Card Game 65
Horizon Zero Dawn 36
I am Setsuna 76
Injustice 2 50
Inside 90
Kingdom Hearts III 97
Last Guardian, The 54
LawBreakers 79
Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, The 32
Madden NFL 17 67
Mafia III 69
Mass Effect: Andromeda 22
Mighty No. 9 87
Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 6: A Portal to Mystery 94
Mirror's Edge Catalyst 89
Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom 97
Nier: Automata 81
Nioh 66
No Man's Sky 97
Paper Mario: Color Splash 45
Persona 5 22
Pokémon Sun & Moon 76
Prey 23
Pro Evolution Soccer 17 64
Quake Champions 23
Resident Evil 2 Remastered 97
Resident Evil 7: Beginning Hour 18, 80
South Park: The Fractured but Whole 38
Spider-Man 23
Star Ocean V: Integrity and Faithlessness 94
Star Trek: Bridge Crew 81
Star Wars Battlefront: X-Wing VR Mission 18, 23
State of Decay 2 23
Strafe 74
Surge, The 60
Tacoma 58
Tekken 7 78
Thimbleweed Park 77
Time Machine VR 94
Titanfall 2 44
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE 92
Tyranny 75
Unspoken, The 58
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War III 59
Watch Dogs 2 48
We Happy Few 55
Wild 97
Zero Time Dilemma 88

feedback

Nintendo's plans for the future are a hot topic this month, while other readers discuss hardware rumors, spoiler etiquette, and the overabundance of journalism in our magazine... Sorry?

Zeroing In On Zelda

Do you think Nintendo is missing its target? I may not exactly be the intended audience, but in my 23 years, I've played a lot of games, and what Nintendo is doing doesn't excite me anymore. I'm hoping they'll blow me away and win me back with the NX, but I'm afraid right now the princess and I are in two totally different castles.

James Willison
via email

There has been something that I have been meaning to ask you: What are your thoughts about Nintendo's E3 plans? With the new Zelda being the only playable game at the show, are any of you disappointed? I'm fine with it because the game has been under lock and key for at least three years and it would be nice to hear more about it. P.S. Yeah, I'm the same moron who sent you that hate letter about Sonic Lost World. Wasn't one of my finest moments.

Charlie Marble
via email

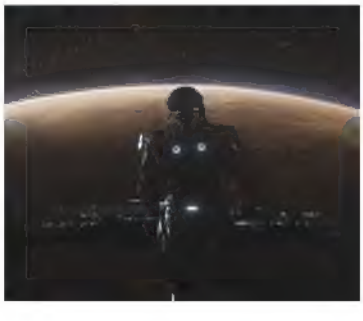
Nintendo continued to play by its own rules this E3, skipping a traditional press conference and downsizing the software line-up it showed to fans. You can read our complete thoughts on Nintendo's show on page 16, but there's a silver lining for Zelda fans at least; we got a lot of hands-on time with Link's newest outing and liked what we played. Head to page 32 to find out more.

Not Looking For An Upgrade

I really have no interest in 4K televisions or the ".5" system upgrades for PS4 and Xbox One. Releasing new systems seems like an obvious stab at the NX and a gimmick to force sales of 4K televisions. My 500GB PlayStation 4 works just fine and I have a top-of-the-line 1080p television. So I see no reason to upgrade my TV or my PS4. There are also way too many games coming out – Persona 5, Mass Effect: Andromeda, Deus Ex: Mankind Divided, etc. – for me to think about buying an upgraded PS4.

Rocky Johnson
via email

Sony and Microsoft's decision to release more-powerful consoles this early in the hardware cycle has certainly struck a chord with gamers – and not a good one. While it sure sounds like a great way to alienate the tens of millions of players who have already bought into current-gen, we simply don't know enough about the systems to make any kind of judgment call. Our advice? Take any speculation with a handful of salt and wait for Sony and Microsoft to deliver some more facts before you pick up your torches and pitchforks.



Contact Us
feedback@gameinformer.com

No More VR Reviews?

I really enjoyed your recent coverage of VR and am looking forward to trying it myself. However, I was a bit disappointed to see six pages of issue 278's review section devoted to games for devices that most of us won't have for a while – and I typically buy new tech before other people I know. For VR, however, I'm waiting for more titles until I determine the specs of an expensive new PC build. Maybe cover a couple of key titles, put the rest online, and save the print pages for things more readers can currently play. It was a good sampling of the options, but hopefully the page count was just for one issue (for now).

Jon Walker
via email

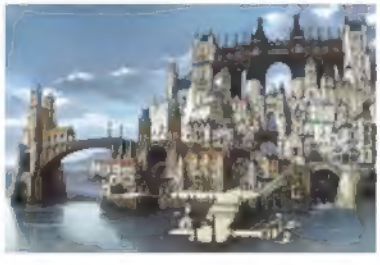
We covered the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive as we would any other hardware release – by reviewing the headsets themselves, as well as the most promising launch titles. While many readers don't have access to those games just yet, those reviews may help them decide whether or not they want to buy a VR unit in the first place. Rest assured though, with the launches out of the way, VR games and our subsequent reviews will slow down – but hopefully not too much.

Spoiler!

I recently picked up Bravely Default to see what all the buzz was about. I also noticed there was a review of Bravely Second in the latest issue, and read it to see what you have to say about the sequel. I'm sorry I did, because the review makes it a point to spoil something about the plot of the first game – twice! When I read a review of a game I expect it to be a look at that game, not a discussion of events in the first game. Now I've been spoiled on something I would have experienced firsthand, and I'm sure I don't need to spell out why that's poor form on your part. It's all well and good to talk about how the sequel compares to the first, but it's more than possible to do so without actually spoiling something that happens in the first game. Come on, guys. I've been subscribed to you for years now. I expect you to be better than this.

Mike Altman
via email

Everyone has a different metric for what they consider a spoiler, and we try to accommodate our readers as best we can. In the case of our Bravely Second review, we didn't include any specifics on plot points or characters from the first game – only the comparison of a plot mechanic that directly impacted our enjoyment of both titles. Spoilers are a two-way street. It's fine to be sensitive about spoilers, but if you are, you also have to be sensitive about what you read – so maybe don't jump into a review for the sequel of a game you're actively playing and afraid to have ruined?



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Will the next Zelda game ever come out?"

Yes.

"Has Sony given up on the PS Vita?"

Sure seems like it.

"Can everyone just shut up and stop acting like Nintendo is the worst thing on the planet?"

Probably not.

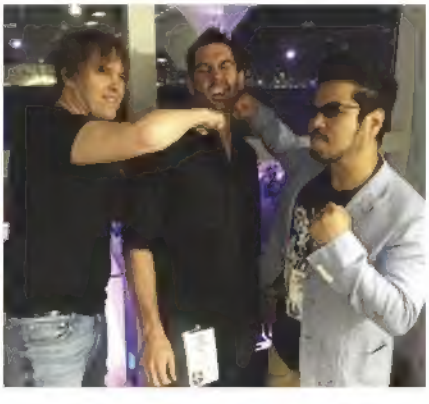
Reader Gibberish:

"Where can i purchased this article for class assignment how gaming effect the mind."

Question Of The Month:

What was your biggest takeaway from this year's E3?

gi spy



PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) If you couldn't tell from the four thumbs-ups, our interview with Nintendo's legendary Shigeru Miyamoto went well.
(Right) Shea's chat with Tekken creator Katsuhiro Harada and translator Michael Murray didn't go quite as smoothly…

On Your Mind

- Must-Buy Games
- Can't Wait For VR!
- Stop Writing About VR!
- Continued FF XV Excitement
- What's Up With Nintendo?

Can't Hardly Wait

In issue 278, we asked readers what the next must-buy game is on their list. While many had their sights on an upcoming space epic, others are looking further into the future for their next big purchase.

It has to be No Man's Sky, a game that finally satiates my desire for endless space exploration, combat, and trading. As a console gamer, if this game lives up to expectations, I could be playing it for years. Very intriguing!

Charles Hansborough

My next must-buy game is definitely Horizon Zero Dawn. The action/RPG gameplay looks fast-paced and exciting, the visuals are absolutely breathtaking, and the setting and lead character show potential for an entire franchise of games. Here's hoping Guerrilla Games can knock it out of the park!

Tyler Keller

My next must-buy game is Battlefield 1. I've spent the past few years yearning so much for a return to WWII, but I never even stopped to consider how amazing a WWI game might be. I've become completely burnt out on the future, combat genre that Call of Duty has been pursuing, so while Infinite Warfare is traveling further into the future and going full sci-fi, I'll be in the trenches with the next Battlefield.

Iain Topp

One Weird Trick...

I have been playing video games since 1989, when I got my first game system: an NES Power Set, complete with a subscription to *Nintendo Power*. I know that YouTube and online sites provide tips and tricks to finish games. However, I read *Game Informer* now, and I would really like to see some tips and tricks – it seems your magazine is more like video game news/journalism. Will there ever be a day where we have game tips and tricks as well as journalism in the magazine again?

Willie Davis
via email

It's rare that we're accused of doing too much journalism, but here goes. G.I.'s Secret Access and Play To Perfection sections used to focus on tips and tricks, but it died out years ago when the vast majority of developers stopped including cheat codes in games. Truth be told, the online space is simply a more natural fit; no one wants to wait a month or longer for advice when they're stuck or struggling with a game, when they can instantly look for help on the Internet. On the bright side, gameinformer.com offers lots of helpful guidance for new games – and even a little journalism from time to time.

(Left) Not done bugging fighting-game creators, Shea also tracked down Mortal Kombat designer Ed Boon to talk about NetherRealm's upcoming Injustice 2. (Right) Ben Reeves and Jeff Cork ran into a few familiar faces during their annual E3 showfloor tour. Watch the video at gameinformer.com.

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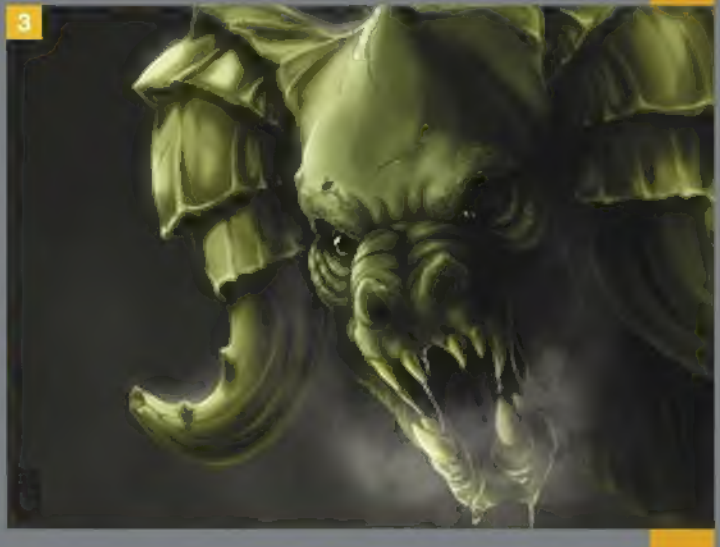
gallery

WINNER

1 Scott Middlehurst
The Master Sword must not be that great of a weapon if people keep encasing it in concrete

2 Colin Bruns
We don't often feature art from younger readers, but this piece by Colin is wonderfully creative. We just want to see what happens to the AT-AT when it grabs a mushroom

3 Kaytlyn Cota
This is likely what a Deathclaw will look like through Fallout 4's upcoming VR



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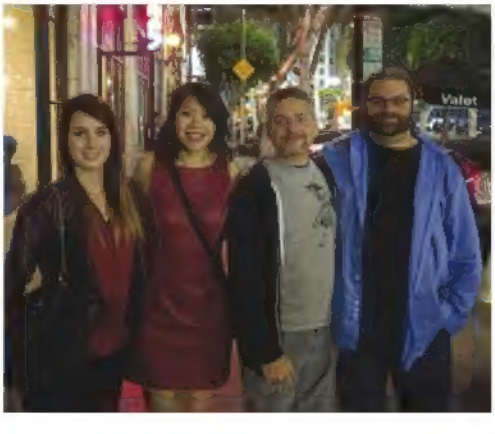
{Left} How do we know actor Scott Porter is a good older brother? He got his siblings Brendan and Ariana into E3! {Right} This year at E3, Dan Tack caught up with Twitch broadcaster extraordinaire Sonja Reid, plus Twitch's PR gurus, Erin Fan, and Chase.



LIFE
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5

connect

E3 2016

NOTABLES

10 microsoft report card

16 nintendo report card

18 vr report

20 e3 game trailer roundup

24 best tech of e3

Three years into a new console life cycle, several previous gaming generations were settling in for a long stretch of comfortable familiarity with platforms and technology. But that's not the message emerging out of this year's E3. As a figurative state of the union for the gaming industry, E3 is the best time to form a prognosis about the coming months for anyone interested in the hobby and business of interactive entertainment. While the individual messages from companies differed, the unspoken message that emerged is clear – change is in the air.

Microsoft and Sony continue to vie for prominence, even after Sony has settled into a comfortable lead for the console generation. With a strong games line-up and the impending launch of PlayStation VR, the current market leader has a lot to crow about, even while it remained silent about previously announced plans for a more powerful PlayStation 4.

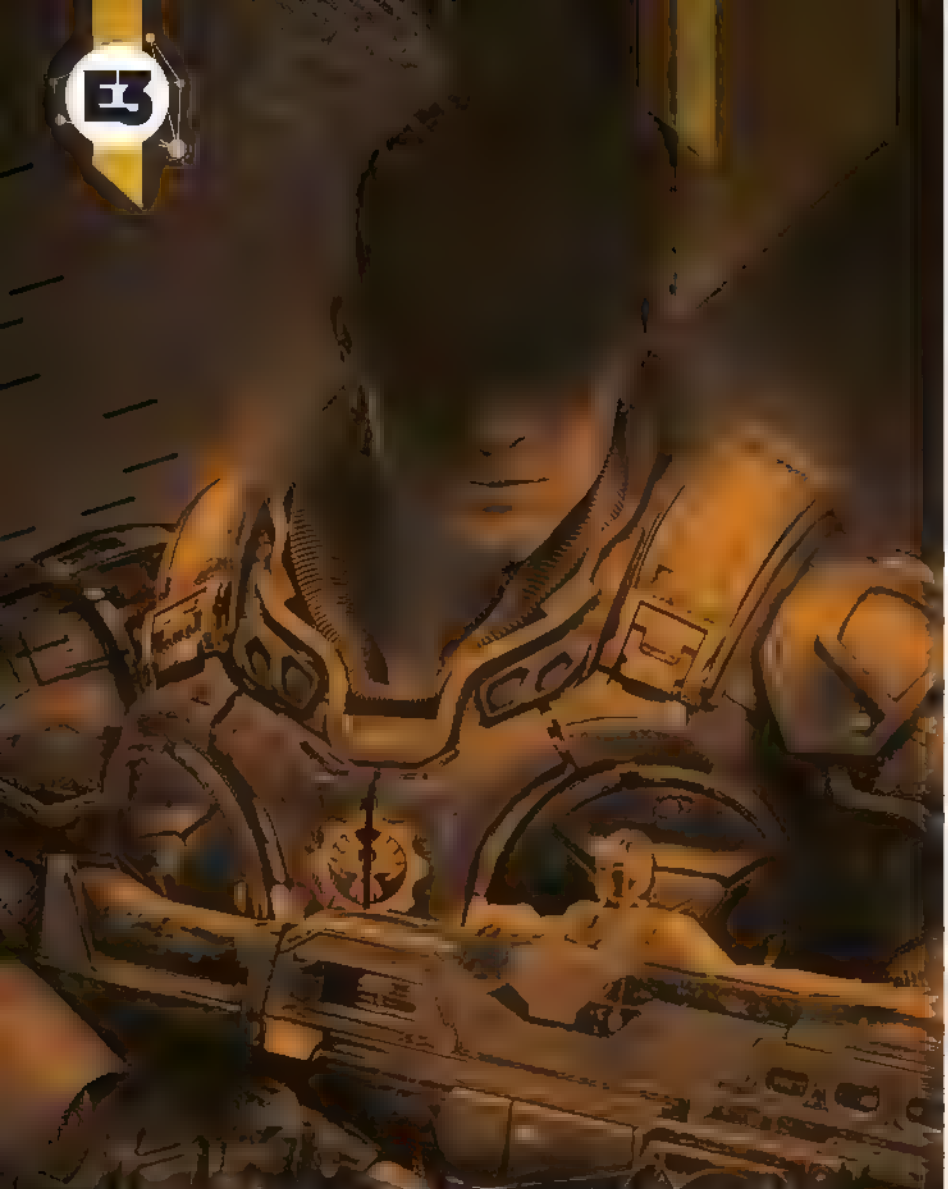
Microsoft isn't sitting on its heels, however. The platform holder introduced a slimmer Xbox One along with Project Scorpio, an even more powerful console slated for the end of 2017, a release clearly planned around the potential of both 4K gaming and virtual reality.

VR has made a splash at previous shows, but this year felt like the first time the new technology stole the limelight for extended moments. Major third-party publishers like Ubisoft, Bethesda, Warner Bros., and Electronic Arts all revealed VR projects of varying scales. If there were any doubts that the arms race is on, it's time to dispel them.

Meanwhile, Nintendo once again sidestepped much of the tussle, instead focusing in on just a few flagship franchises. The long-awaited The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild served as the headliner, and the elephant in the room remained the as-yet undetailed NX platform, which promises to further shake up a near future that already promises some significant shifts.

Even this year's show floor transformed, as Activision and Electronic Arts both opted to host concurrent and separate events away from the E3 showfloor. It was the most striking signal in years of splintered allegiances and business plans within the Electronic Software Association, and may pave the way for yet more dramatic shifts to the big show in the years to come.

Amid all the business talk, the focus as always came down to some huge games and exciting announcements, from a new God of War to the return of the Titanfall franchise. Read on for our comprehensive look at the big winners of E3 2016.



MICROSOFT REPORT CARD

Consoles dominate the Xbox conversation, but a flimsy game lineup fails to impress

Every year, E3 presents an opportunity for underdogs to upset the balance of power. With the right announcements and demos, a company can use the show to project a new sense of purpose and direction. That seemed to be Microsoft's goal heading into the convention this year, hoping to reset the playing field and gain new advantages against the competition.

by Joe Juba

Microsoft aimed high by bringing a lineup of exclusive titles and two new iterations of its console, but these maneuvers did not generate the seismic shift the company was likely hoping for. Some lackluster games and on-stage presentations – along with conflicting statements regarding its upcoming hardware – still leave Microsoft playing catch-up.

The Galen Center in Los Angeles once again played host to Microsoft's annual E3 press conference, which kicked off with a big (but unsurprising) confirmation: A redesigned Xbox One is on the way, as was widely rumored in the months prior to E3. Dubbed Xbox One S, the new version of the console is 40 percent smaller than the current model, supports 4K Ultra HD content via streaming and Blu-ray, has an IR blaster, and comes with a wireless controller with Bluetooth support. For all of those additions, one notable feature has been removed from the unit: the proprietary Kinect port. If you're still looking for signs that Microsoft is abandoning its efforts in the motion-sensing arena, they don't come much clearer than removing built-in support (though USB adapters are available). However, losing Kinect is a small price to pay for high dynamic range technology that improves gaming visuals.

After the official announcement of the Xbox One S and an introduction from Xbox head Phil Spencer, The Coalition's Rod Fergusson took the stage to showcase a lengthy demo of Gears of War 4. The game looked great in action, and it is coming exclusively to Xbox One and Windows 10 PCs – a fact that allowed Fergusson to introduce Microsoft's "Play Anywhere" initiative. Players who purchase digital versions of games in the Play Anywhere program pay once for access to the title on both Xbox One and Windows 10 PCs – including carrying over progress and achievements between platforms. While this cross-play capability is a nice bonus, Windows gaming initiatives have struggled in the past due to the disparity between gamers' enthusiasm for the platform and Microsoft's. Only time will tell if this new approach will prove more successful.

Gears of War 4 wasn't the only impressive demo to get stage time; Microsoft did a commendable job balancing its trailers and teases with more substantial looks at its upcoming titles. For example, Forza Horizon 3 was unveiled at the event, but was also played live with four-player co-op and available for E3

attendees to play (p. 68).

Scalebound wasn't on the show floor for hands-on, but Platinum Games' creative director Hideki Kamiya picked up a controller to show off the biggest boss fight his studio has ever made. The battle against a crab-like monstrosity (which drew comparisons to Sony's infamous "giant enemy crab" from E3 2006) highlighted the game's four-player co-op support. However, despite the creature's massive size, the standard mix of ranged and melee combat on display didn't sell what makes Scalebound unique or interesting – but it could have been worse.

Everything doesn't always go according to plan during press conferences, a fact that Final Fantasy XV proved. Square Enix's Hajime Tabata took the stage to introduce a new slice of gameplay that pits Noctis and his party against the beast Titan in battle. However, after some prolonged fighting and dodging, the game seemed to have issues progressing to the next phase of the encounter, which made for an awkward demo. The sequence eventually reached an abrupt conclusion, and the obvious technical issues didn't win over any converts who have been skeptical about the project. Fortunately, the playable demo on the show floor was functioning properly, and left a much better impression.

Another uncomfortable stretch of the press conference featured Minecraft, the global phenomenon that practically everyone has played or seen. Instead of trusting the audience's familiarity with the title, Microsoft presented a five-minute demo full of clumsy scripted banter just to show off a new update that enables cross-platform play and some add-ons coming later this year.

Though the momentum of Microsoft's press conference suffered at points, various trailers helped recapture the audience's attention. State of Decay 2 was the most exciting of the bunch, revealing the sequel (now with multiplayer) to Undead Labs' open-world, zombie-survival game that became a surprise hit in 2013. Dead Rising 4's debut trailer was another high point, with plenty of improvised weapons and zombie-slaying chaos – and it was also available to play at the show. Tekken 7 also had a demo in addition to its press conference trailer that showed Heihachi and Street Fighter's Akuma fighting with an array of impressive attacks. Inside got a trailer announcing its release date of June 29, but you can read our full review on page 90 for all the details on that amazing game.

A returning title from last year's stage was Fullbright's Tacoma. Though it didn't get time during this press conference, the demo was compelling and showcased the studio's aptitude for storytelling. Microsoft also showed off Comcept's ReCore again, but despite its stylish new trailer, the shine dulled once we got our hands on the gameplay demo. Halo Wars 2 and Sea of Thieves were also underwhelming in action, even though they got dedicated stage time at the conference.

One way Microsoft distinguished itself is by putting the spotlight on indies. During a portion dedicated to the ID@Xbox program, a live demo for We Happy Few gave us another look at the unsettling thriller, and it's releasing (as an Xbox Preview and Steam Early Access title) on July 26. CD Projekt Red announced that Gwent – the card game from The Witcher 3 – is getting a standalone release along with a closed beta coming first to Xbox One and Windows 10 in September. In addition to those pillars, a sizzle reel showed off brief snippets of other anticipated indies like Cuphead, Outlast II, and the console version of Stardew Valley.

With the game reveals finished, Phil Spencer took the stage again for the final flourish of the press conference: the announcement of Project Scorpio. Though it is a new and more powerful console, Spencer did not call it a next-gen machine. Instead, it is a "serious inflection point" for Xbox, with six teraflops of processing power to deliver 4K gaming and pave the way for VR experiences – though Spencer conspicuously avoided mentioning any specific VR partners. Scorpio plays all previous Xbox One games, and any future game developed for Xbox One works on the original system, Xbox One S, and Scorpio (though you will see performance differences between models). Microsoft's new approach to iteration demonstrates a desire to break out of the traditional console cycle.

"At Xbox, we want to deliver a world where you have more freedom and choice to play the games you want with the people you want on the devices you want," Spencer said. "A world where you can play without boundaries. A world beyond generations." This could be a great move for Xbox One, since it is lagging behind the PS4 in sales. However, with a holiday 2017 release date and no firm information on the PlayStation 4's confirmed (but not present at E3) hardware upgrade, Project Scorpio's impact on the gaming landscape is too distant to predict.

WHAT IS PROJECT SCORPIO?

Going solely by Microsoft's stage presentation, the purpose of Project Scorpio seems straightforward: It's a powerful new version of the Xbox One that supports 4K gaming and VR, and it plays all previous and future Xbox One games. However, when people probed Microsoft for more info during E3, the answers on these points were inconsistent. Will we see Scorpio exclusives? Do you need a 4K TV to get any benefit from Scorpio? Should we expect this kind of annual hardware iteration from now on? The differing (and contradictory) responses from Microsoft representatives on these points generated some confusion about what exactly Scorpio is and what incentive gamers have to upgrade. The points will undoubtedly be clarified and solidified as the console's development continues, but the coming-out party for Project Scorpio left gamers with more questions than answers.

FINAL GRADE

Microsoft filled its press conference with games and provided plenty of hands-on demos on the show floor, but failed to generate high levels of excitement with those offerings. With the exception of Gears of War 4, Microsoft's current portfolio doesn't have the high-profile, blockbuster exclusives that drive enthusiasm. That may be a factor in Microsoft's attempt to reshape the conversation by revealing Project Scorpio, but announcing two consoles at one press conference led to more confusion than clarity. Why would Microsoft damage the prospects of the Xbox One S by immediately announcing that its successor will come just a year later? Plus, the lack of information about Scorpio (and the mixed messages from Microsoft executives about the console's features and purpose) conveys a sense that Microsoft simply announced it too early. On top of all that, leaks prior to E3 diminished the impact of many of Microsoft's announcements. Information about Forza Horizon 3, Dead Rising 4, State of Decay 2, Gwent, Xbox One S, and even Project Scorpio was available online before the big event, which didn't leave Microsoft with much to surprise its most attentive fans. We saw some good games from Microsoft this year, but they were tempered by some missteps, and nothing had the jaw-dropping quality that makes an E3 showing truly memorable.

C+

SONY REPORT CARD

Sony holds the lead with strong showing, but mysteries abound

Sony had a comfortable lead in both public opinion and hardware sales over its chief competitor coming into this E3. Recent months of NPD tracking consistently show PS4 leading the hardware race, exclusive software like Uncharted 4: A Thief's End has performed well, and multiplatform releases like The Division and Destiny have seen better sales on PS4. Simultaneously, Sony is coming off a showing from last year's E3 that was almost universally lauded for its spectacle and excitement. While it would be hard to beat its own 2015 presentation, Sony came out swinging with a strong press conference this year.

by Matt Miller

Sony was the final major publisher to take the stage, and most show attendees agreed that the best had been saved for last. Headlined by a forceful and exciting announcement for a new God of War, Sony signaled that it has no shortage of big games on the horizon. But the tenor of that announcement was indicative of a trend we saw from the company throughout its presentation – a focus on intrigue and mystery, but often without the context and explanation that we've come to expect. Many of Sony's most exciting presentations were left without additional explanation from developers, leaving several questions unanswered.

Opening in the historic Shrine Auditorium with a live orchestral overture composed and conducted by Bear McCreary (*Battlestar Galactica*, *The Walking Dead*), the music set the stage for the dramatic presentation to follow. Moments later, we learned that the piece was created as an accompanying score to the newly announced God of War, in which the violent antihero Kratos finds himself enmeshed in a new world of Norse mythology. While the refreshed setting allows for the introduction of mythological creatures like trolls and dragons, the biggest tonal shift for the franchise comes through the introduction of Kratos' young son and the exploration of the dynamic between parent and child. Between the impressive combat, soaring musical score, and promising new locale, God of War emerged as a clear winner, earning our best in show award (p. 30).

Between the announcement of a long-awaited October 25 release date for The Last Guardian, and the reveal of a new zombie game entitled Days Gone from developer Bend Studio, Sony made the case that its publishing arm is committed to bringing long-in-gestation projects to market while continuing to foster new franchises. A closer look at Detroit: Become Human finally gave us a sense of the gameplay dynamic for David Cage and Quantic Dream's new interactive story. A trailer for a new Spider-Man game from Insomniac turned heads, both

because of the talented developer at the helm, and the smart timing of a PS4 exclusive for a comic brand that is likely to see big media and fan attention in the next few years.

While those games looked great, the second biggest show-stealer was an in-depth look at Horizon Zero Dawn. Guerrilla's new project was revealed last year, but many questions remained unanswered about its open world, combat, and story. The lengthy onstage demo helped to dispel at least some of those concerns, and later booth visits proved that the game feels as good to play as it does to see.

Sony has long viewed third-party partnerships as a core component for its success, and those relationships were once again apparent. After a shaky announcement trailer several weeks earlier that failed to do justice to the new game, Sony's briefing provided a lengthy demo for Activision and Infinity Ward's Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare. Reveling in zero-G combat maneuvers, ship-to-ship outer space combat, and stellar visual fidelity, many were surprised when the Call of Duty logo finally popped up at the close of the demo. Capcom's Resident Evil 7 was also a big surprise, sporting a new first-person camera, and a return to the franchise's tense horror roots. Not only is the game targeting PS4, but we also got the announcement of the game for PlayStation VR.

That major franchise reveal for PSVR opened the door for an extensive rundown on the upcoming PSVR – a $399 headset that many analysts believe may outsell competitors Vive and Rift when it releases. That date is now set for October 13, with the promise of 50 PSVR games before the end of the year. While not all of those games were shown, we did get several promising teases, including Star Wars Battlefront: X-Wing VR Mission, Batman: Arkham VR, Final Fantasy XV VR Experience, and a new original space combat and exploration title called Farpoint. Sony is openly touting the uniformity of its PS4 platform as a big plus for developers looking to craft VR projects, but like with the other VR headsets already on the market, we haven't seen much in the way of larger, lengthier games for the platform.

While it may have failed to produce much excitement from the audience of press and business attendees, Sony also took time to highlight its family-friendly options, including the recently released Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens. A partnership with Activision is reviving an old Sony mascot with remastered versions of the original Crash Bandicoot games.

Sony's most unusual reveal also came from its highest-profile new partnership. Hideo Kojima took the stage with no shortage of fanfare, and was greeted warmly by an audience aware of the punishing restrictions placed on him during his final months of employment at Konami. Now independent, he debuted a trailer for his new project, Death Stranding. Starring Norman Reedus of *The Walking Dead* fame, the enigmatic video showed beached whales, a baby dissolving into oil, and strange distant figures floating godlike on the horizon. What it all means is anyone's guess, but the presentation fostered no end of discussion and speculation throughout the rest of E3.

Notably absent this year was any mention of the Vita, providing damning evidence for anyone still holding out hope for Sony's portable system. More disappointing was the lack of focus on indie projects during the press conference. In recent years, Sony has taken time during its briefing to highlight the impressive and varied work going on in the indie scene, so it was unfortunate to see those teams left out of the presentation. Even so, Sony's booth at the convention proved that even without a spotlight, the company has no shortage of indie relationships, with numerous titles on display.

Given Microsoft's discussion during its E3 briefing of not one but two new consoles on the horizon, Sony's decision to not discuss its retrofit of the PS4 seemed like a tactical move. With Microsoft's cards on the table in terms of both console horsepower and release window, Sony now has the flexibility to respond to the conversation in its own timeframe. Even so, considering Sony already announced that the Neo is coming, it did feel strange to get through all of E3 and not have any mention of the new console's potential launch, which most recently has been rumored for as early as this holiday.

FINAL GRADE

Sony knows its position as the current market leader, and its confident E3 showing in both press conference and booth demos showcased that position. Several notable game announcements, the impending arrival of PSVR, and substantial third-party partnerships all signaled a strong forecast for the upcoming year. Even so, the shake-up in mid-generation consoles over the next couple of years has the chance to upset the status quo; Sony's clear task moving forward is to not squander its market lead, as happened once before during the PS3 era.

B

NINTENDO REPORT CARD

Nintendo ignores the elephant in the room, but delivers on its most exciting release

Part of Nintendo's new approach to E3 is to state what it won't be showing before the show. Last year, it revealed the Wii U Zelda title wouldn't be at the show and made good on its promise. Before the show this year, Nintendo confirmed its new console, codenamed NX, would not be at the show. As promised, the closest thing we got to NX news was during Ubisoft's press conference, where the publisher promised Just Dance 2017 would release on Nintendo's mysterious console.

by Kyle Hilliard

For all it left back in Japan, Nintendo made it clear this year would be all about The Legend of Zelda. The cross-platform Wii U/NX adventure was the only game it brought for attendees to play on the show floor, and it monopolized Nintendo's two-day E3 Treehouse live stream.

Nintendo surprised everyone by stating it would not be doing a press conference or a Nintendo Direct presentation at E3. Instead, Nintendo built a Zelda-decorated booth with playable kiosks on the show floor and had two days of live streaming with intermittent announcements. It kicked off its live stream with a Zelda trailer, revealing the game's subtitle Breath of the Wild. After that, it cut to a Pokémon Sun & Moon presentation with the promise of more Zelda to come later, and the collective Internet voiced their annoyance.

The rest of its first day was devoted to Zelda, revealing in detail how it earned its Breath of the Wild subtitle by showing off the open world and how Link interacts with it. The expanding list of new mechanics was surprising and frequent, leading to a consistently engaging look at the game. Link can jump, scale nearly any surface, cook, and change his clothes, and miniature puzzle dungeons are littered across the environment.

Zelda is Nintendo's biggest unreleased game, and it smartly devoted the majority of its E3 time to showing it off. Despite all the new details and literal hours of gameplay on display, Nintendo says it only revealed one percent of the new world. Time will tell if this is just marketing speak or a true tease of the game's vastness, but it left us more excited than ever for the next Zelda (p. 32).

For its second day of live streaming, Nintendo spent time on the upcoming mobile game Pokémon Go, revealing a somewhat pricey ($34.99) pedometer companion for the game. It also revealed a new RPG for 3DS called Ever Oasis from the creator of the Mana series and highlighted what may be the Wii U's last exciting exclusive, Paper Mario: Color Splash. New Amiibos and a surprise release for Rhythm Heaven Megamix were also part of the show.

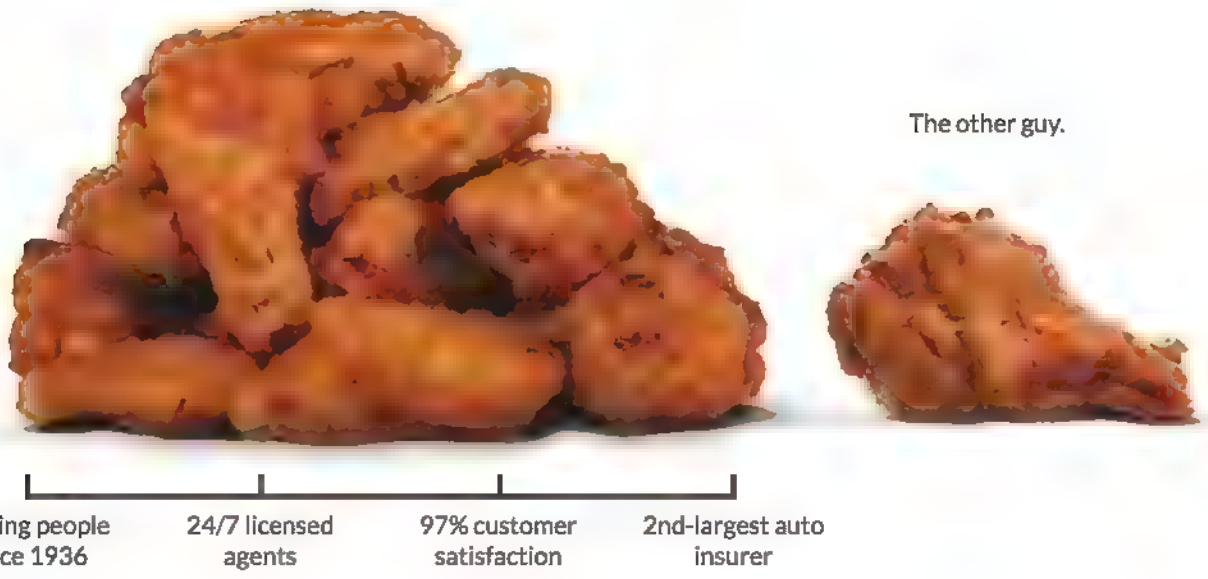
FINAL GRADE

C

Nintendo is withdrawing from E3 more every year, and carefully curbs expectations before the show begins. Its E3 lineup was light on surprises and content. The complete absence of NX details, which is still scheduled for a March release, is confusing. Instead of showing Breath of the Wild on its new platform, Nintendo debuted the game on its fading Wii U console, which has a scarce lineup moving forward.

Despite its questionable decision to hold back NX news and have a light lineup, Zelda still made a huge splash for Nintendo. By focusing its booth on the game, lots of attendees got to play. By streaming it online, those who weren't at the show gained a good sense of what to expect from Link's next adventure. It's an atypical way to do E3, but it worked.

GEICO



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THE E3 VIRTUAL REALITY REPORT

Bigger publishers dip their toes in virtual waters *by Mike Futter*

With virtual-reality headsets now available for purchase, this year's E3 marked a shift in the medium. The industry hasn't moved entirely beyond the experimental phase of game development, with developers still trying to figure out how to conquer some of virtual reality's new challenges. However, some of the bigger names in gaming have stepped up with projects that give the three big platforms more oomph.

While the PlayStation VR isn't out until October 13, Sony's E3 press conference was the coming out party for major names and franchises. Four rapid-fire announcements gave Sony's foray into virtual reality a much-needed boost.

Batman: Arkham VR puts players in The Dark Knight's cowl. Rocksteady is at the helm for this shorter experience that seems to be focused more on the franchise's investigation gameplay rather than combat.

Those that own Star Wars Battlefront will get a free X-Wing VR mission. And Square Enix is planning a taste of Final Fantasy XV for Sony's headset. Both of these appear to be "experiences" rather than extended games.

The biggest new announcement from a major publisher is Capcom's Resident Evil 7. The entire game will be playable in virtual reality when it arrives next January.

The Vive got some attention as well, primarily from Bethesda. The publisher is adapting both Fallout and Doom experiences for the headset. Our demo indicates that you'll need motion controllers, but not room-scale VR. Rift owners who buy Touch controllers might be able to take advantage of these games as well, but nothing was announced.

Oculus rolled out a quartet of games, each in different genres. All of them evidence an evolution beyond the baby steps seen in Rift launch titles. Developers are starting to experiment with traversal (a tricky proposition in virtual reality), figure out new methods for competitive play, and toy with emotional extremes typically reserved for cinema.

Unfortunately, HTC and Valve didn't make a big showing at E3, with official Vive presence limited to a small area in the lobby. Oculus also has yet to reveal specific timing and pricing for its Touch controllers, but says that release is still on track for some time in 2016.

Virtual reality is off to an expectedly slow start, but it is picking up speed. As major publishers and major developers step up with new, experimental, and exciting games, we're only at the beginning of a medium that will augment, not replace, our current understanding of what gaming can be.

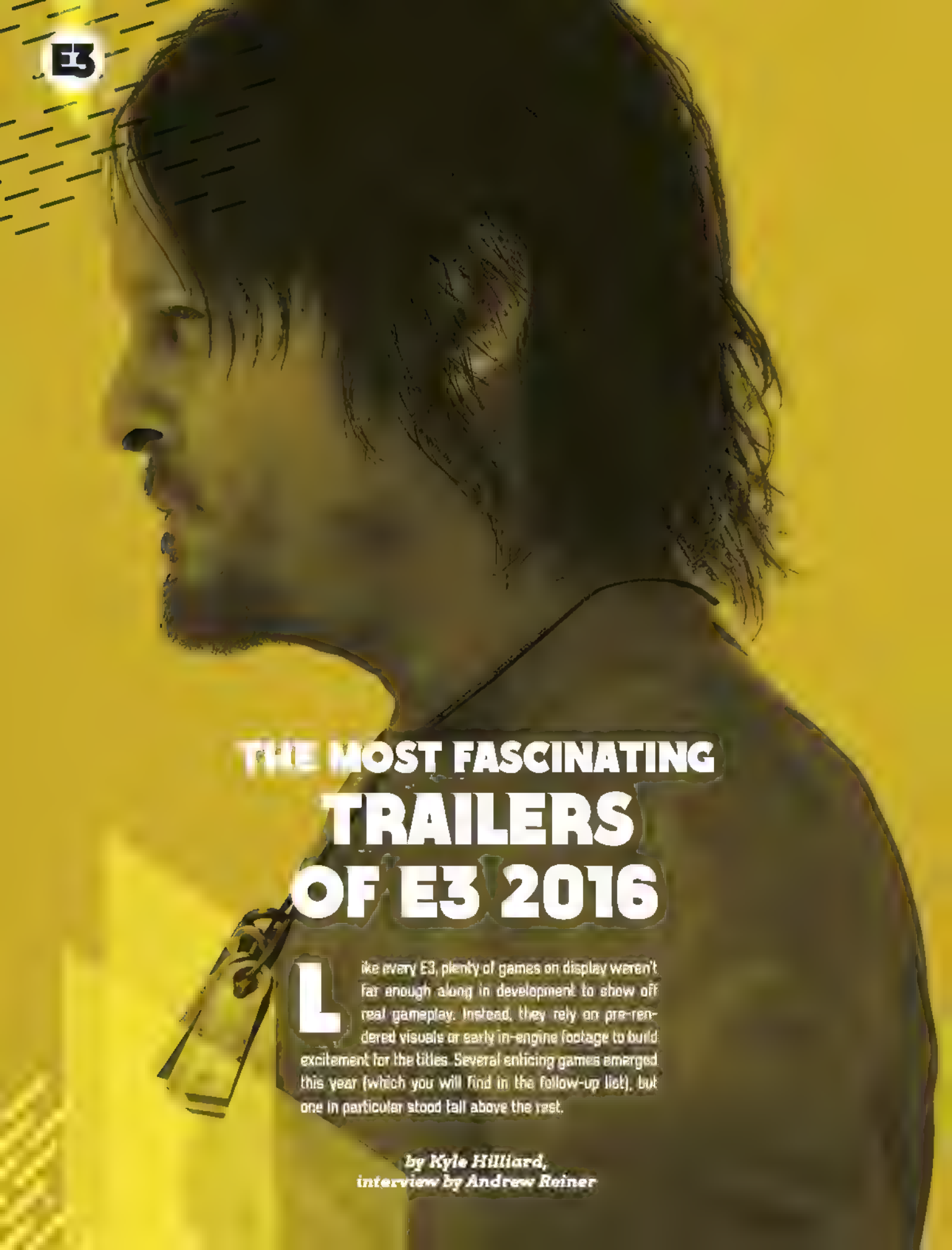
NOT JUST A PRETTY HAIRSTYLE.

I CAN DO THE FATALITY WITH ANY CHARACTER.

MESSY LOOK
FLEXIBLE PASTE.

SHAPESHIFT ANYTIME.
ANYWHERE.

AXE
FIND YOUR MAGIC.



THE MOST FASCINATING TRAILERS OF E3 2016

Like every E3, plenty of games on display weren't far enough along in development to show off real gameplay. Instead, they rely on pre-rendered visuals or early in-engine footage to build excitement for the titles. Several enticing games emerged this year (which you will find in the follow-up list), but one in particular stood tall above the rest.

by Kyle Hilliard,
interview by Andrew Reiner

DEATH STRANDING

***Platform:* PlayStation 4, PC**

The PlayStation 4 exclusive Death Stranding instantly became one of the most fascinating reveals of E3 after being shown on Sony's press conference stage. The surprise trailer for Hideo Kojima's new project raised lots of questions and answered none. Norman Reedus portrayed a character waking up on an oil-soaked beach attached to a newborn that disappeared as soon as it was picked up, leaving behind fading, oily handprints. The trailer ended with a naked Reedus, surrounded by dead beached whales, looking to the sky at five humanoid figures floating in the distance. It is a fascinating, but confusing look at what a post-Metal Gear Solid Hideo Kojima game will look like.

We spoke with its notoriously cagey creator, Hideo Kojima, to figure out what was happening in the trailer, and how far in development Death Stranding truly is before looking at some of E3 2016's other exciting trailers.

I've had a lot of fun following you on Twitter the last couple of months. It seems like you're having the time of your life with your new company. How is life as an independent game developer treating you?

It hasn't changed that much over the last few years. I haven't been stuck in meetings anymore, and there's a lot of freedom, but for these past few years I've been making games, it's very much the same. Because of that, I have no fears. The one thing that is dangerous of going independent is that I don't get to deal with that many people anymore. That could limit my vision, so I'm trying to read as much as possible, and watch as many movies as possible, and try to go to different places.

One of the most interesting parts of you signing with Sony was watching you travel with Mark Cerny to different Sony development studios. What was the purpose of these visits? Were you getting to know Sony's culture, or were you perhaps looking at tech that would be available for development?

In December we announced our studio, and announced we were working with Sony for our first title. At that point, I already had a vision in mind, and I had to try to figure out how I would make it. In that regard, I was in search of an engine, and what tools would I use, and what services would be available to make it. The problem with that wasn't only the technology, but I had to find facilities, and put together a team. I was also studying what kind of environment [Sony] had, and what would be the best one for my team.

Where is the new Kojima Productions based, and how staffed up is your development team at this point?

While we finally settle into what will be our offices, we'll be in Tokyo and not America. In December, our staff was only four people, including myself. We arranged some temporary offices and had desks, chairs, my own computer, and that was it. From December we made the announcement, and we had a lot of people fortunately apply to work with us, and it's been a lot of interviews lately, but we were fortunate enough to make different tests for the game. For our teaser, we shot with Norman [Reedus] at the end of March, and in two months we were able to develop this. Now that this is announced, I hope and suspect more people will apply, and we'll turn it into something cool.

After the Sony press conference, we were discussing Death Stranding for hours and theorizing what it could be. Can you go into the inspiration behind the game?

There is this author that I'm a huge fan of named Kōbō Abe. One of his stories is called *The Box Man*. He wrote a short novel called *Rope*. I don't know if it has been translated to English. In this story, he states that the first tool mankind invented was the stick. The stick was invented to keep away bad and unpleasant things as a weapon. And the next thing mankind invented was the rope. Unlike the stick, the rope had [potential] to tie things close to you together.

Games nowadays are based mainly on sticks. You communicate and interact based on sticks, punching, or shooting. Through cooperative and multiplayer you connect with other players through sticks. Now, in this game, you will be able to use sticks, but I also want people to use ropes to connect somehow. In the teaser, you can see crabs, whales, dolphins, handcuffs, and a baby with an umbilical cord. Those are connections. Connection is the theme of the whole game. The word "stranding" is a theme of the game. The name Death Stranding plays off key themes in the game.

How did you and Norman Reedus connect initially and for this project?

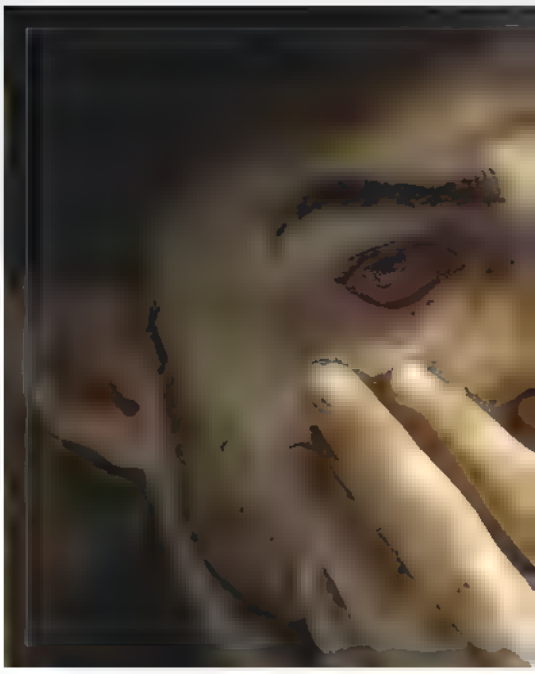
I wanted to work with him, and have been a fan of *The Walking Dead*. Going back to P.T., I wanted to work with him on that. I tried to go to him directly. I don't like going through agencies. In this case, my friend Guillermo del Toro was also close with Norman, so he gave me his contact info and I got in touch with him. We just started work on P.T. and then he was sad about it [getting canceled] and the difficult circumstances back then, so we kept in touch. I talked to him again in February, and we made the decision to work together again. Toward the end of March we shot what we needed for this [trailer].

P.T. was being made with Reedus and del Toro. Were you considering reuniting the entire team and bringing del Toro on board?

I'm not working with Guillermo on this project, but we've always wanted to do something together. I don't know if that's going to be a game, a movie, a television show, or a comic book, but we want to work together. With Guillermo, I discussed [Death Stranding] before signing with Sony, and said "I'm thinking of this project and working with Norman again" and he was happy, and thought it was a good idea.

Where are you guys at with Death Stranding? Is it still in the conceptual stage, or are you in active development?

We're weighing our options for the engine. We are down to two candidates. One of the options was used to create this [trailer]. Because it's a new game, we want to do many tests first. As far as the imagery and the concept of what the world will look like, it's already settled. In between all of this, I'm trying to make the story and the characters and how it all comes together. We should settle on the engine soon, and at that point we'll move from tests to full development.



THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM – SPECIAL EDITION

Platform: *PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC*

We wanted a new Elder Scrolls announcement from Bethesda, but is still exciting to see *Game Informer*'s 2011 Game of the Year recipient updated for the current generation of consoles. The trailer revealed it's much more than a straight port, with heavily overhauled visuals, mod support, and all kinds of new beautiful aesthetic touches.

FRIDAY THE 13TH: THE GAME

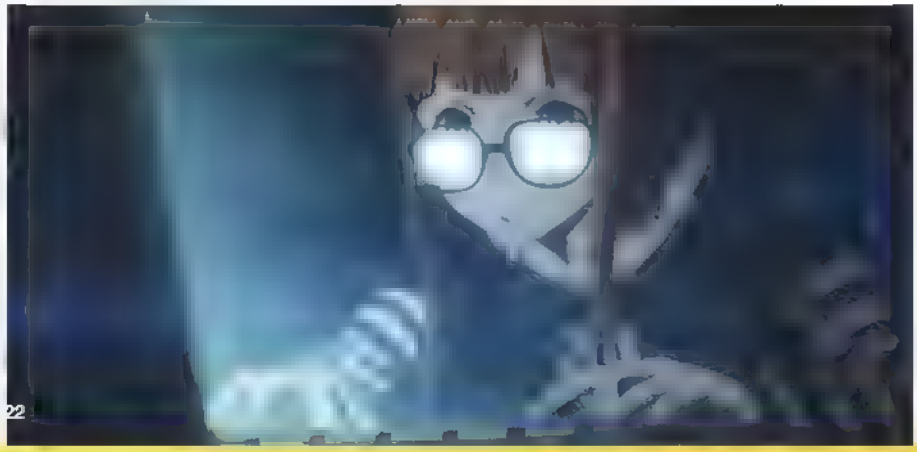
Platform: *PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC*

The Kickstarter success story revealed its first gameplay footage at E3. The video showed both sides of the fight with a player controlling Jason while he tracked down teenagers, and what it looks like to try (and fail) to outrun the masked machete man

MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA

Platform: *PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC*

BioWare's new trailer for Mass Effect: Andromeda is full of exciting mysteries. It shows a *Normandy*-like vessel called the *Tempest*, the new Mako, and various strange alien beasts. Players chart unexplored territory alongside a crew full of returning species like Asari and Krogans – but who are these characters and what's their story? For the moment, those questions remain unanswered.



PERSONA 5

Platform: *PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3*

Fresh Persona 5 footage showcased some interesting new gameplay elements. Players fight against an "expulsion timer" to avoid being kicked out of school, participate in part-time jobs like flower salesperson or convenience-store clerk to acquire currency and skills, and take on monsters in dungeon areas. The Persona acquisition system seems similar to the Shin Megami Tensei series, where the player must talk to the enemy to lure them over to their side, and you can pass turns in combat to your critical characters to get the most out of your abilities. Everything looks like a dream come true for franchise fans.

PREY

***Platform:** PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC*

Scrapping many of the ties to the Human Head original and canceled sequel, this first-person reboot of the Prey franchise is coming to us courtesy of Arkane Studios with the help of Chris Avellone (Fallout: New Vegas, Planescape: Torment). The theme of aliens experimenting on humans is intact, as is the first-person perspective, but this game bends more toward psychological horror than the original.

SPIDER-MAN

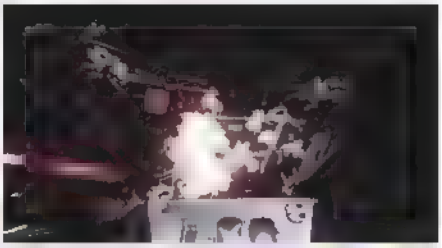
***Platform:** PlayStation 4*

Despite rumors before the show, the PlayStation 4 exclusive Spider-Man game revealed during Sony's press conference was a big surprise. Developed by Insomniac (Ratchet & Clank, Sunset Overdrive), this game has a standalone story in a new world. Based on the in-engine footage pulled for the trailer, this open-world, web-slinging adventure already looks promising.

QUAKE CHAMPIONS

***Platform:** PC*

After the successful reboots of Wolfenstein and Doom, Bethesda is breaking out another id classic with a new eSports take on the original arena shooter. Though this new interpretation of the game introduces distinct heroes with unique abilities, Quake staples like weapon pick-ups and rocket jumping return, and id is building in eSports infrastructure like tournament brackets and shoutcasting support.



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT: X-WING VR MISSION

***Platform:** PSVR*

The X-Wing showing was brief, but convincingly demonstrated why sitting in the cockpit of an X-Wing fighter in VR is a great idea. This Criterion/DICE collaboration showed Star Destroyers and blockade runners looming in the background as X-Wings engaged a battalion of TIE Fighters, all from the first-person perspective. Best of all, this VR mission is free to anyone who purchased Star Wars Battlefront on PS4.

STATE OF DECAY 2

***Platform:** Xbox One, PC*

The original State of Decay was a huge hit on Xbox 360, practically guaranteeing a sequel. Shown during Microsoft's E3 press conference, the surprise announcement teased things fans have been clamoring for from the original game: four-player co-op and much higher production values.

THE BEST TECH OF E3

by Ben Reeves

XBOX ONE DESIGN LAB CONTROLLERS

When Microsoft announced the new Xbox One S at E3, it also debuted an updated controller that features a slightly streamlined design, twice the wireless range, textured grips, a standard a 3.5mm headphone jack, and built-in Bluetooth technology that can interface with most modern PCs, tablets, and phones. Those who don't want to pony up for a new console can still grab a controller with all of these bells and whistles. Better yet, players can customize their controller on Microsoft's online design lab, which boasts over eight million different color and button style combinations, as well as personalized engraving. New controllers start shipping in December.

Starting at $79.99 | *xboxdesignlab.xbox.com*

TURTLE BEACH ELITE PRO

If you spend more than 30 minutes at a time with your headset then you know how important it is to have a comfortable pair of ear cups. Turtle Beach's ComfortTech Fit System helps you adjust the headset to the size of your skull, and its gel-infused foam padding keeps your ears cool. Meanwhile, a built-in glasses relief system is ideal for those without perfect vision. Thankfully, the Elite Pro's 50mm NanoClear Speakers put out crystal-clear audio while an omnidirectional microphone helps drown out ambient audio while you issue commands.

$199 ***turtlebeach.com***

SMART BOY DEVELOPER KIT

Our phones are always in our pockets and play some of today's hottest mobile games – which reminds us of another piece of mobile technology from yesteryear. Thanks to Hyperkin's Android phone add-on, you will soon be able to play Game Boy and Game Boy Color cartridges using your mobile phone. Hyperkin is currently taking pre-orders for the development kit, which includes the open source app and firmware, so hopefully a retail release isn't far behind.

$59.99 | ***hyperkinlab.com***

RAZER STARGAZER

Razer's Stargazer is a live streamer's dream, capturing 720p video at 60 frames per second or 1080p video at 30 frames per second. The Stargazer's Intel RealSense technology allows the webcam to digitally separate objects in the foreground from the background, creating green-screen effects without the need for an actual green screen. Razer's new webcam even provides out-of-the-box 3D scanning and facial and gesture recognition.

$199 | **razerzone.com**

ABSOLUTE PREACHER VOL. 1

Before diving into AMC's newest comic-based drama, read the origin of Jesse Custer, a Texas Preacher who becomes completely disillusioned with his beliefs before he is granted the super-natural ability to make everyone do whatever he says. This giant-sized tome collects issues 1-26 of Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's beloved comic run.

$150
vertigocomics.com

ASH VS EVIL DEAD

Ash is just a lovable goon and chainsaw-handed store clerk who has spent most of his life avoiding responsibility, but when a Deadite plague threatens to destroy all of mankind he's forced to face his demons once again in this long-awaited 10-episode follow-up to the classic campy horror franchise.

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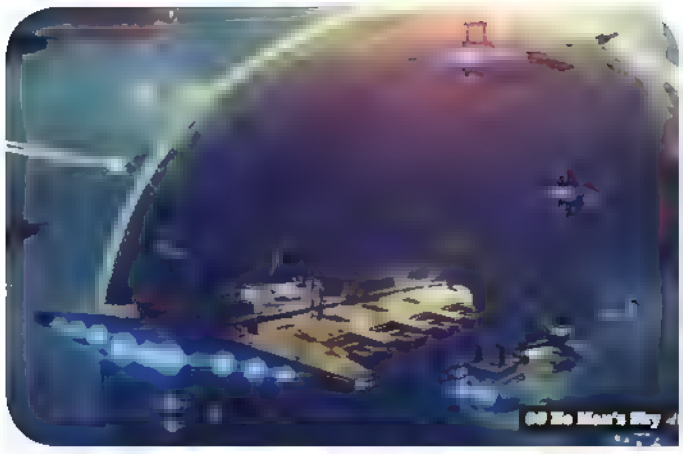

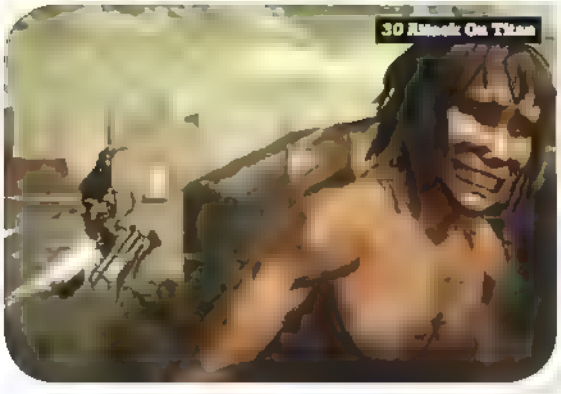

August

04.1 Gen Con 2016

The largest tabletop-gaming expo in the world kicks off today, and runs for four days in Indianapolis' convention center. More than 60,000 people attended Gen Con last year, and this year's turnout should break that record. With over 500 companies showing off games, and 14,000 events on hand, there isn't enough time in the day to touch even a fraction of what this show offers.

04.2 Quake Con 2016

Bethesda's three-day expo is a celebration of game playing, offering a huge area where thousands of players bring their gaming gear to play against each other. Held in Dallas' Hilton Anatole hotel, QJake Con has become a place where Bethesda reveals new games and information. We're guessing we'll get a good look at Dishonored 2 and QJake Champions at this year's show.

05.1 Rio Olympic Games Opening Ceremony

At 8 p.m. ET, the 2016 Olympic Games kick off with the lighting of the torch ceremony in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The torch relay will pass through over 300 Brazilian cities. The Olympic events start on August 6 and run through August 21.

05.2 Suicide Squad

After *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*'s lukewarm reception, DC's film division has been shaken up, with new people stepping in to right the company's cinematic ship. How that affects today's theatrical release of *Suicide Squad* is anyone's guess. Outside of the Joker's unique look, this film has generated a fair amount of buzz, and looks to be a lot of fun — an element *Batman v Superman* was lacking. Cross your fingers and hope DC gets this one right.

09 New Releases

- 88 Heroes *(PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac, Linux)*
- No Man's Sky *(PS4, PC)*

12 Pete's Dragon

Disney's latest craze of transforming beloved animated classics into live-action films continues today with the theatrical release of *Pete's Dragon*. *Cinderella*, *Maleficent*, and *Jungle Book* were all great successes, and *Pete's Dragon* looks to be the most interesting film of the bunch, blending a mystery of a child lost in the woods with the fantasy elements of dragons. Just don't try to make a live-action *Bambi*, Disney.

17 Gamescom 2016

The video game industry descends upon Cologne, Germany, for four days of gaming fun. This is one of the most packed shows, consisting of tens of thousands of fans standing in line to get their hands on the latest games. This is a great show for reveals and news, so keep an eye on gameinformer.com for the latest details during these days.

18 New Releases

- Deus Ex: Mankind Divided *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
- King of Fighters XIV *(PS4)*
- Madden NFL 17 *(PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)*

30 New Releases

- Assetto Corsa *(PS4, Xbox One)*
- Attack on Titan *(PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Vita, PC)*
- Champions of Anteria *(PC)*
- Hatsune Miku: Project Diva X *(PS4, Vita)*

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E3 HOT 50

While VR headsets and Microsoft's console announcements stole some of the spotlight during this year's show, E3 is nothing without the software that reveals where games are going next. The gathering offered no shortage of clues about the industry's next steps, from big shooters like Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare and Titanfall 2 to new announcements like Dead Rising 4 and God of War. Long-awaited projects such as Resident Evil 7: Beginning Hour and The Last Guardian got release dates. VR games and indie developers maintained a strong presence as well through games like The Unspoken, Abzû, and Strafe. We selected the 50 games that not only looked and played great, but also kept show-goers talking even after E3's doors closed for another year. Read on to discover what we picked.

GOD OF WAR

A new world for a familiar god slayer

Platform: PlayStation 4 **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Santa Monica Studio **Release:** TBA

A new era of God of War was unveiled at Sony's E3 press conference, accompanied by a live orchestra led by Bear McCreary pumping out a menacing melody as the trailer ran. The crowd in attendance didn't recognize what game they were looking at for a full minute. Rather than watching a certifiable god killer scream bloody murder as he tears limbs from bodies, the trailer begins with a father, hidden in shadow, gifting his young son with his mother's knife. The father is commanding in tone, calling his son "boy," and appears to have been gone for some time when he asks, "She taught you to hunt, yes?" The boy responds, "Yes, sir." The father, whose voice is deep but not quite familiar, says, "Then show me what you know."

At this point, the crowd is in a state of bewilderment, not knowing what they are looking at. The boy has a face full of scars, and is wearing garments made of wolf or bear skin. His arm appears to be tattooed with various Nordic symbols, and his house is made entirely out of wood. The father steps out of the shadows, revealing the familiar cursed red and white skin of Kratos, the star of the God of War series. He's older, heavier set, and bearded, with slight hints of gray peppered into the black. "I am hungry. Feed us," he says assertively. A large number of people at the press conference give the reveal a standing ovation. The roar of enthusiasm drowns out the demo for a few seconds.

After smashing the Greek pantheon to pieces, Kratos felt the rage within him subside. He learned how to control the monster within, and left Olympus, his home and battleground, behind. The ashes of his fallen family remain sewn to his skin as a reminder of his past, but Kratos has found a way to start over in life. He apparently has a new wife and son, and has relocated to a mountainous snowy region of the world. Although we don't know where exactly he and his family are located, they are somewhere in Scandinavia, within the realm of Norse mythology.

This mythology is extensive, stretching from a time when gods like Thor, Loki, and Odin ruled the land to the arrival of the Vikings. In an interview on Sony's E3 LiveCast, Cory Barlog, God of War's creative director at Santa Monica Studio, detailed where this tale is set within the mythology. "We ended up in a period that is not the Viking era. It's sort of before the Viking era's migration," he says. "It's the era the Vikings are always talking about when they say 'The gods have abandoned us. They used to walk the earth.' This is the period of time in Scandinavia we are at, when the gods walked the earth."

The demo continues on with Kratos (now voiced by Christopher Judge of *Stargate SG-1* fame) and his son leaving their home to spend quality time together in the woods. Kratos is studying his son's hunting ability, tasking him to track and kill a deer. This is a bold move for Santa Monica Studio to make, as the pacing and action don't lineup with anything we've seen in a God of War game before. It looks more like Naughty Dog's The Last of Us, complete with the protagonist having to keep tabs on a non-playable youngster.

At this point in the game, the player is controlling Kratos. The camera placement isn't set in the cinematic isometric view we're used to, and is instead directly behind Kratos, making him look like more of a focal point than the world, which often stole the eye in his previous games. This particular region of Scandinavia is ordinary in appearance, filled with trees and rocky bluffs covered in snow.

Kratos runs forward confidently, eyes on his son, who is joyfully bouncing across rocks and jumping up to knock snow from tree branches. The boy does his job, however, stumbling upon fresh deer tracks. He leads his father on and almost runs directly into the deer, which must stand at least 8-feet high on all fours.

In this one moment, you control the boy's aim and shot

"Slow down, boy," Kratos cautions. "You must think, do not simply react. Be calm and plan." These words aren't shouted, and although deep in tone, carry a hint of compassion.

Kratos pauses for a second after he hears a bird take flight, then catches up to his son, who has his bow drawn and is ready to take a point-blank shot at the deer. The boy misses and the deer scurries off again. This act angers Kratos. His voice is raised. "What are you doing? Now its guard is up! Only fire..." Kratos takes a deep breath and his voice drops again but is still terse. "Only fire when I tell you to fire."

The hunt picks up deeper into the wilderness, but not against the deer. A bipedal demon holding a sword appears. Kratos, who no longer has his Blades of Chaos, wields an axe laced with an electric blue magic. He swings it manically a few times to drop the demon. A button-press prompt appears on screen, signaling an execution opportunity. Kratos plunges his axe into the demon's neck, cutting the body nearly in two. The innards appear to be molten with a vibrant orange glow. This action summons additional adversaries to the fray. Kratos dispatches the first demon by throwing his axe and pinning his opponent to a rock. He uses his bare hands to take down the second, a flurry of nearly a dozen punches that culminates with the demon's jaw falling off. Without even looking in the direction of his axe, Kratos raises his hand to magically summon it back to him, much like Thor does with his hammer in Marvel's films.

Kratos' new weapon of choice is a magical axe

The beasts of the world speak Norse. Kratos won't understand them, but his son does

Kratos and his son pass through a shrine that appears to have been ravaged by war years ago, and cross over onto a bridge leading toward a set of large red doors. The bridge crumbles below them, as a giant troll emerges. The troll barks out something about Valhalla, and picks up a large stone with a glowing rune on it. Kratos throws the bow to his boy "Here's your chance. Show me you are ready."

The camera pulls back a little to accompany the immense scale of the beast Kratos hacks at its leg, and uses his familiar evasive roll to avoid the lumbering swipes made by the troll. The battle moves to a small, iced pond butted up against a steep cliff. The boy, who appears to be ready for the fight, fires electrical arrow shots at the troll, delivering a brief stun effect that Kratos takes advantage of.

A prompt for "Spartan Rage" appears onscreen, removing any doubt of this not being the one and only Kratos. By pressing R3 and L3 simultaneously, Kratos taps into his former anger to pummel the troll into submission. With the troll's head pinned to the ground, Kratos asks his boy to finish it off with an arrow The shot is taken, but it hits Kratos directly in the shoulder

While he's unphased by it, the ice below them starts to crack, and they need to flee quickly His son finds high ground, as Kratos brains the troll with his axe

This is the action we've come to expect from God of War – loud, over-the-top, and filled with cringe-worthy moments of brutality What comes next is not.

The hunt for the deer comes to a somber conclusion when the boy lands a crippling arrow shot Interestingly, the shot is taken by the player, as control switches to the son for this one, tiny moment. As the beautiful stag lies dying, Kratos walks his son over to it and forces him to end its life with the knife his mother gave him Kratos holds his son's hand as the blade cuts into the flesh The moment makes you feel equally sad for the deer and the boy, who didn't want to kill it. He just wanted to make his father proud, but didn't realize what he would have to do until that moment arrived

Barlog says God of War won't just be a game of Kratos teaching a kid how to survive in a harsh world. "The son is the only one who understands the language," he adds. "The player, who is playing as Kratos, experiences that kind of stranger in a strange land [feeling], where their kid actually has a lot of the power. The troll is speaking in ancient Norse. The kid understands what he is saying The player and Kratos don't."

How much of Kratos' time will be spent with his son? "Throughout the entire game, Kratos is constantly teaching his child, in banter and actual interactivity," he says. "We've dedicated an entire button to the kid. Wherever you look, if you press the 'son' button, if it's at an enemy and you want to attack them, your son will attack them, or interact with a door."

No release date has been given, but God of War will be exclusive for PlayStation 4, and can't come soon enough **» Andrew Reiner**

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

A breath of fresh air

Platform: NX, Wii U **Style:** 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo **Release:** 2017

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time is one of the most beloved games of all time, but it established a formula that the Zelda series has adhered to for nearly two decades. While many Zelda fans would argue the formula still works, Nintendo feels it's time to break from tradition. The next entry in Nintendo's flagship action/adventure series is more like a modern open-world RPG. At the same time, Link's latest quest remains faithful to the spirit of the original NES adventure.

Our hands-on time with Breath of the Wild begins as a disembodied voice awakens Link in a mysterious sleeping chamber. We don't know how long Link was "sleeping," but the world is full of relics of what once could have been an advanced technological society, so Link may have been in hibernation for a long time. It's worth noting that this voiceover (which could be Zelda) is in English – a first for the series. Producer Eiji Aonuma told us that the final game features even more voiceovers, but wouldn't confirm whether or not the entire game is voiced. Either way, it seems like Link remains a silent protagonist.

It sounds almost silly, but another major change for the series is the addition of a jump button. Not only can Link jump, but he can climb on almost any surface. We walk up to a nearby rock and quickly shimmy up it. A depleted stamina bar is the only thing that prevents us from climbing all the way up a nearby cliff face.

Breath of the Wild's version of Hyrule is ripe for experimentation. After spotting a group of moblins hanging out at the bottom of a ravine, we push a nearby boulder down the hill and it rolls over them, making short work of the enemies. Another clearing contains a massive rock golem who proves to be a fearsome challenge given the quality of our starting equipment. In other areas of the world, players can hunt animals, explore caves for treasure, and chop down trees to create makeshift bridges across rivers.

Before long, we stumble into an enemy camp. Instead of roaming freely across the world, enemies are now clustered in more natural ways, and often set up camps or have logical patrol patterns. Using Link's bow, we eliminate an enemy in the camp's watchtower, which allows us to sneak up on the remaining two foes.

Link will upgrade his equipment more frequently, but his gear will also deteriorate and break

Large tentacled monsters called Guardians are scattered across the world. They don't seem friendly

A sound meter on the corner of the screen shows how much noise Link is making; you now have to worry about being heard as well as seen if you choose to sneak up on your foes.

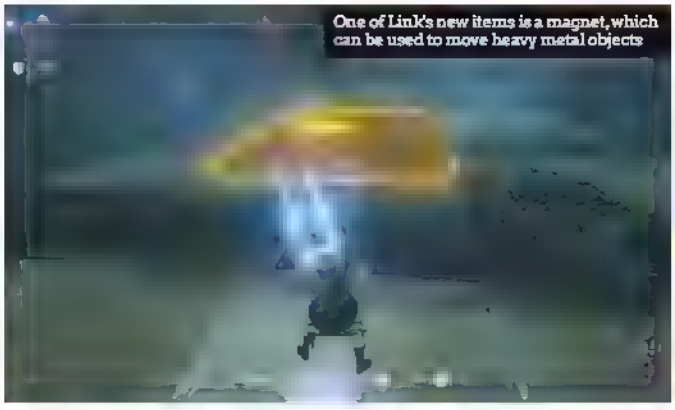
One of our fallen enemies drops a club that has a higher attack rating than the sword we currently have, so we quickly swap out our gear. In Breath of the Wild, Link finds new weapons and armor more frequently than in past games. This is important, because Link's weapons now deteriorate over time and eventually break. Nintendo hopes this encourages players to experiment, since the game features a greater variety of weapons. During our demo we find swords, clubs, and spears, all of which handle differently and provide unique attack advantages.

After clearing out the enemy camp, we decide to make use of their fire. Link no longer replenishes his health by collecting hearts after cutting grass or breaking open pots. Instead, he forages berries, mushrooms, and meat, which can be eaten. However, the health benefits of these items are boosted by cooking them first. Players can mix and match ingredients to create new recipes, which could provide stat boosts or temporary extra health.

Campfires can also be used to advance time, so we camp until midnight. When the stars come out, some enemies go to sleep while new creatures – such as skeleton warriors – roam the wilds. The horizon also looks different at night, and we grow intrigued by a soft glow emanating off in the distance that we hadn't noticed during the day.

After a trek through the woods, we get close enough to the glow to discover that it is a shrine. Shrines are bite-sized dungeons that feature one or two puzzles and lead to a new item or some other upgrade. They also function as fast-travel points across Breath of the Wild's massive world. Aonuma hinted that the game still features a few dungeon-like experiences, complete with epic boss fights, but most of the puzzles have been scattered across more than 100 shrines in the open world.

The Legend of Zelda is one of the longest-running and most consistent franchises on the market, so it's nice to see that Nintendo isn't resting on its laurels. When Breath of the Wild releases on the Wii U and Nintendo's mysterious NX next year, players will explore an open world that is at least a dozen times larger than The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess. Thankfully, it looks worth that wait. **» Ben Reeves**



One of Link's new items is a magnet, which can be used to move heavy metal objects

03

DISHONORED 2

Another familiar face returns to Dunwall

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks **Developer:** Arkane Studios **Release:** November 11

Arkane Studios used the Bethesda Showcase at E3 to showcase the same levels and information we got when we visited its Lyon, France, headquarters for our June cover story. *Game Informer* readers already knew many of the details about the new Karnacan setting and two playable protagonists, Corvo and usurped empress Emily Kaldwin, but two new segments of the presentation revealed some interesting twists to Dishonored 2's gameplay and story.

The demo opened with an exterior shot of Dunwall, which looks much more vibrant and cleaned up than it did during the rat plague. As the doors to Dunwall Tower open, we see a celebration taking place memorializing Jessamine Kaldwin on the anniversary of her assassination. We're seeing the perspective of Emily as she enters the ball, and Corvo takes her side.

Speaking to the audience, Emily admits the country is going through a tough time, but thanks them all for taking the time to celebrate her mother. "I don't think I'm very good at this," she mutters to Corvo, who reassures her and says he's confident they'll catch the crownkiller soon. Judging from the conversation, the crownkiller appears to be someone killing all the enemies of the court. Emily remarks that people are starting to think Corvo is the killer, which he denies and says someone is trying to make them look bad.

The lights dim and we hear the sound of unsheathed knives and screams. When the lights come back on we see Corvo and Emily with their backs to one another, surrounded by enemies. A later trailer reveals the presence of Delilah Copperspoon, a major character from The Knife of Dunwall and The Brigmore Witches DLC from the first game. Is she the villain of Dishonored 2?

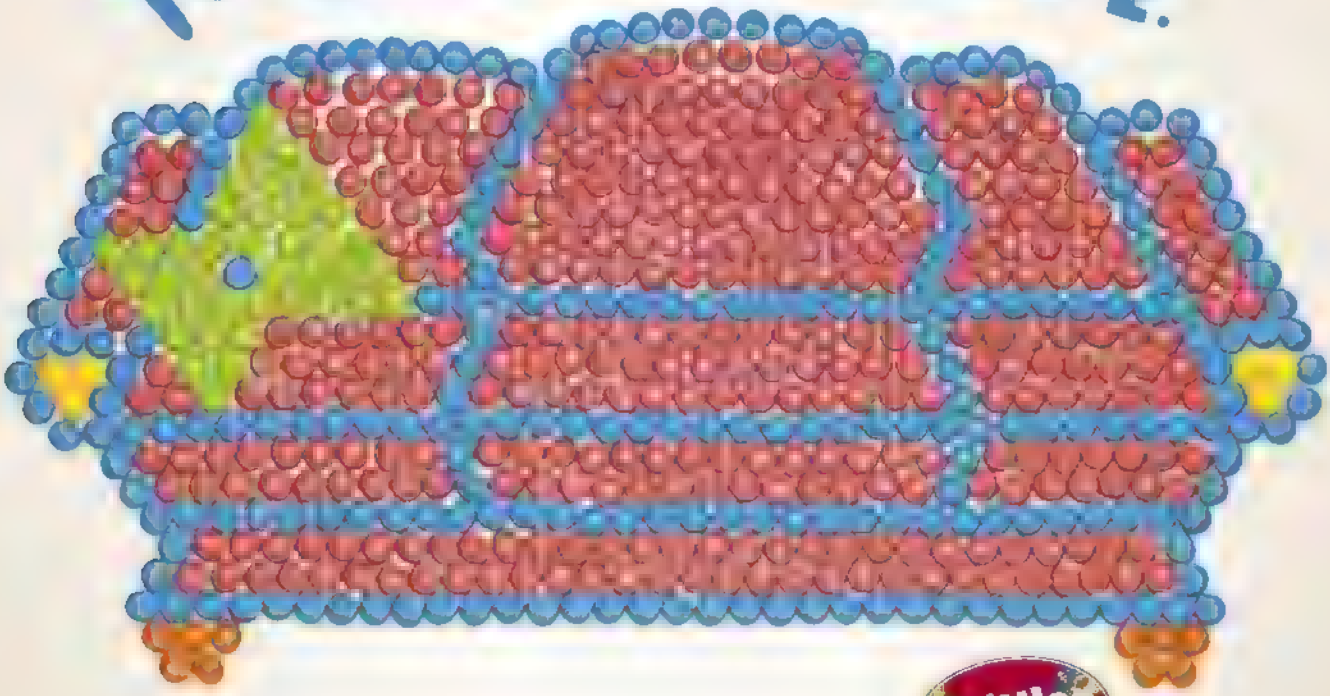
"Delilah is back, and we deepen the character and understand the character more," says creative director Harvey Smith. "There were a lot of things that we didn't have time to do last time ..We've tried to do a little more of the high production value stuff this time so something that just would have been mentioned in a note before – like Delilah's history with somebody – is now more detailed, where you visit a location, or see a scene, or talk to somebody about it. That helps a lot."

Later in the demo we see another new instrument of the Outsider given to both Emily and Corvo. Called the timepiece, this mysterious device allows players to jump between two time periods in the same environment to get around obstacles or evade enemies. In this instance, the hero has been stripped of supernatural powers by a strange occurrence, making the timepiece the only instrument to get past collapsed passageways. Smith says after this mission the timepiece becomes a part of the standard stealth suit, which emboldened Arkane to introduce a game mode that challenges players to win the game without the help of supernatural abilities.

Every time we see Dishonored 2, its inventive game systems and deep lore impress. We have lofty expectations, and are excited to learn more in the lead-up to the November 11 release.

» Matt Bertz

Make a SKITTLES COUCH. Then have your tongue search FOR LOOSE CHANGE.



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HORIZON ZERO DAWN

04

Going head-to-head with Horizon's deadly mechanical beasts

Platform: PlayStation 4 **Style:** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Guerrilla Games **Release:** February 28

The Horizon Zero Dawn announcement stunned gamers at last year's E3, and it was easy to see why. While most games set in the post-apocalypse tap zombie plagues and nuclear holocausts for their source material, Guerrilla Games has crafted a compelling world where posthistoric tribes face off against an ecosystem full of predatory robot dinosaurs. Last year's show gave us our first glimpse of Horizon Zero Dawn's promise, but our hands-on demo at this year's show proved just how fun the gameplay is.

During Sony's press conference this year, Guerrilla Games shared a lengthy demo showing off Horizon's many gameplay systems. The audience got a look at the robust crafting system for making ammunition and traps, a Mass Effect-style dialogue system that allows Aloy to pry for more information when talking to NPCs, and her focus-scan ability that highlights an enemy's vulnerabilities and what components it's made out of. We also caught a glimpse of the world map, which promises a massive expanse of land for Aloy to explore.

In addition, the demo shared more about Aloy's backstory. Set 1,000 years after the fall of modern civilization, a strange power is turning Horizon's giant mechanical beasts hostile toward the remnants of humanity. Aloy's tribal leaders chalk the shifting aggression up to demons, and believe only the goddess can save them. However, Aloy is sure there must be a scientific explanation. Her beliefs set her at odds with her tribe, which she must leave behind to find out the truth about her people and the threat.

It doesn't take Aloy long to run into trouble. After saving a fleeing human from a possessed walker, she heads to his nearby abandoned village, where she comes face to face with a towering corruptor. The scurrying machine looks like a hybrid of a spider and a scorpion, and (true to its name) can corrupt other machines by shooting them with a glowing beam, making them even more hostile toward Aloy. A quick scan reveals that the creature is vulnerable to fire and is packing a deadly spike launcher, though its ability to throw boulders with its tail proves the bigger threat.

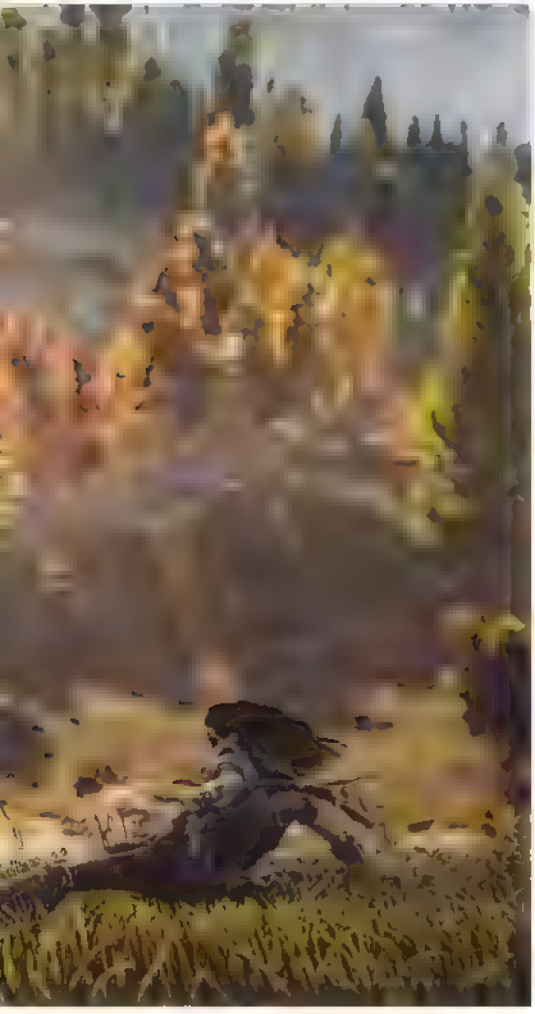
The ensuing showdown plays out like an improvised boss battle, as Aloy cycles through her wide array of weapons. One risky strategy involves laying small, floating explosive traps on the ground, then luring the corruptor within range and detonating them with arrows. However, despite its size, the corruptor is surprisingly nimble. Not only can it quickly catch up to Aloy on foot, it can also leap clear across the battlefield. After dodging a few boulders that obliterate nearby village shacks and smash trees to splinters, Aloy focuses on robbing the deadly creature of its mobility. First, she takes out its spike launcher with a few well-placed explosive arrows (and a little help from Aloy's slow-motion ability). Then Aloy switches to her ropecaster, tethering the corruptor to the ground with successive shots. A half dozen more explosive-arrow shots and the beast finally goes down permanently. The hard-fought battle served as the endcap to another impressive E3 showing for the game, as well as a reminder that humans are no longer at the top of the food chain in Horizon's deadly world.

Sometimes the best way to evade an enemy's attack is to slide right underneath them. Usually running away works better, though.

Each machine is made up of unique components that Aloy can scavenge, such as the energy canisters on the backs of these grazers

As exciting as polished stage demos can be, you can't tell how a game really plays until you get your hands on it. I'm happy to report that so far Horizon doesn't disappoint. I spent 30 minutes running around a small wooded area and trying a number of objectives, including collecting canisters from gazelle-like grazers, knocking the cargo containers off the backs of shellwalkers, and overriding a broad head, which allowed me to ride the steer-like creature for quicker traversal. For a pseudo-cavewoman, Aloy is satisfyingly agile, whether she's scurrying up cliff-sides or sliding beneath the legs of attacking machines. Aiming Aloy's deadly bow also feels good, and is aided by the ability to temporarily slow down time and craft extra ammunition on the fly. Horizon's stealth options allow you to play as a silent assassin, sneaking up on unsuspecting enemies in patches of tall grass similar to Uncharted 4. You can take them down with a melee strike, or even better, override them to fight alongside you. Just be ready to run if you get spotted; even the diminutive watchers are dangerous in packs, and most of the synthetic creatures are just as fast as Aloy.

Alas, my encounter with the formidable corruptor didn't go as smoothly as Sony's stage demo. I died several times while trying to figure out a successful strategy, which ultimately included more running away and hiding than I care to admit. However, I appreciated the challenge; giant demonic robot dinosaurs shouldn't be pushovers, after all, and the solid gameplay mechanics gave me the freedom to approach combat as I saw fit, and to own my mistakes. So far, Horizon controls as well as it looks, making me all the more excited for its February release date. ▸▸ ***Jeff Marchiafava***

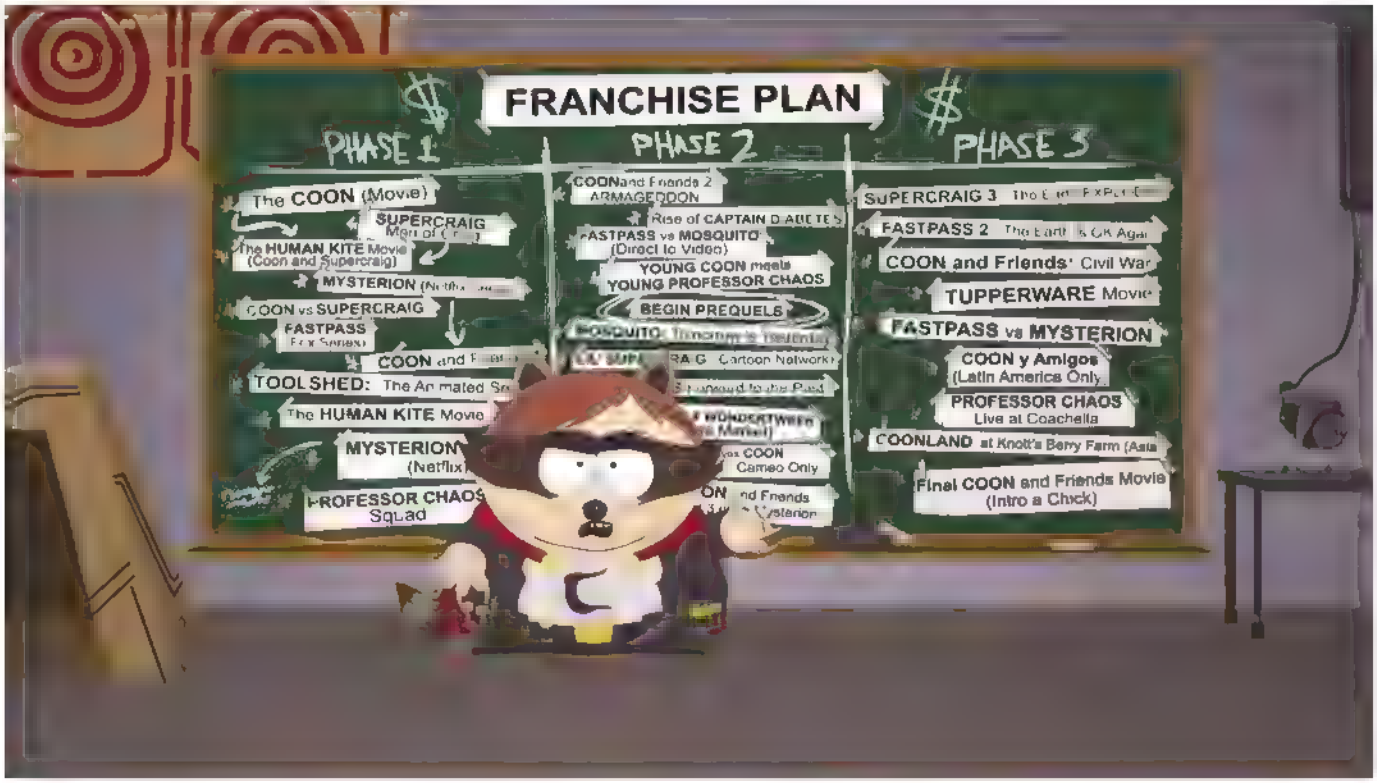


Even small machines like watchers can be dangerous in a group

SOUTH PARK: THE FRACTURED BUT WHOLE

Cartman and the gang gear up for a super-powered sequel

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft San Francisco, South Park Digital Studios **Release:** December 6

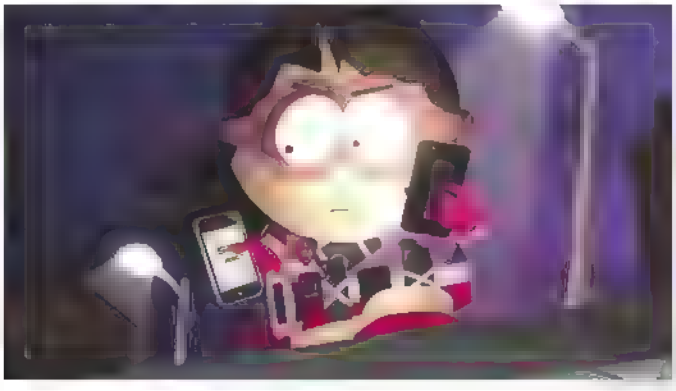


Humor-oriented video games are rarely as funny as they try to be, which is why fans were delighted with how flawlessly South Park: The Stick of Truth translated the cartoon show's irreverent humor into playable form. Stepping into South Park's dysfunctional town as the New Kid and clashing with Cartman and the gang delivered a steady stream of laughs, as The Stick of Truth lampooned every beloved cliché of the fantasy RPG genre. This time around, series creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone set their sights on the ever-expanding superhero genre, and the adventure looks to be just as riotous as the first.

As the name suggests (well, one of the things it suggests, anyway) South Park: The Fractured But Whole is based on a playful sendup of Marvel's *Civil War* storyline. Deep inside Cartman's secret headquarters (i.e., his mom's basement), a rift emerges between the members of Cartman's superhero squad, Coon and Friends. Cartman's vast franchise plan for the rollout of intended movies and Netflix shows has left some of the boys feeling neglected, which leads to half of the gang walking out and forming their own splinter faction called the Freedom Pals. The Fractured But Whole's superhero theme doesn't just provide endless material from Marvel and DC's sprawling universes to make fun of – it also gives Ubisoft San Francisco and South Park Digital Studios the freedom to create a wide variety of silly and outrageous characters and abilities, starting with the main protagonist.

Once again taking on the role of the New Kid, players craft their own superhero from a dozen archetypes, including assassin, psychic, cyborg, and the dreaded karate kid. These classes can be mixed and matched, and upgraded throughout the game to create your own highly customized hero. NPC characters also have their own unique moves, which can

Not only does Timmy end up being a hilarious parody of Professor X, but he's surprisingly eloquent when communicating telepathically with Cartman



Expect even more outrageous antics than The Stick Of Truth served up

The Fractured But Whole features grid-based battlefields, allowing you to target specific enemies, hide behind obstacles, and even launch multiple attacks by pushing an enemy into one of your fellow heroes

be combined for new attacks and abilities. Ubisoft showed off a new "fartkour" mechanic as an example, which allowed your character to pair his or her natural fart ability with Human Kite's gliding mechanic to propel the kids to out-of-reach ledges.

While South Park's sophomoric humor remains intact, Parker and Stone are serious about expanding the series' combat. A new grid-based battlefield adds a tactical layer to the turn-based combat. Players must now take the position of their allies and enemies into account, and can use ranged attacks or sweeping area-of-effect abilities when targeting foes. Players can also use the environment to their advantage by hiding behind obstacles and knocking enemies into objects for extra damage, or other heroes for extra attacks. During Ubisoft's stage demo, Parker cited his love of tactical strategy board games for the fleshed-out combat, which both creators claim is greatly improved over The Stick of Truth.

Additionally, an extensive crafting system gives players more items to use during combat (including a health-replenishing burrito and a cappuccino enema), which are created from the endless amounts of loot players can find in the environment. The loot system provides excellent motivation to scour each location, ensuring no inside joke or Easter egg is missed.

Reprising their role as the New Kid, players will create their superhero archetype from the ground up. Cartman, however, is in charge of coming up with your tragic backstory...

Despite these improvements, the most promising factor for The Fractured But Whole remains its pedigree. While The Stick of Truth developer Obsidian is not working on the sequel, Trey Parker and Matt Stone are once again writing and directing the entire game, and voicing all of your favorite characters. Ubisoft says The Fractured But Whole features twice as much content as its predecessor, and our hands-off demo contained no shortage of laugh-worthy humor. From a telepathic Timmy aping Professor X ("Guys, Timmy just called me a douchebag in my mind!") to the boys calling a temporary timeout during a street battle for a passing car, we couldn't stop chuckling. The Fractured But Whole's myriad improvements, larger scope, and authentic humor made it not just the funniest game of E3 2016, but also one of the best.

» *Jeff Marchiafava*

CALL OF DUTY: INFINITE WARFARE

Battling among the stars

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Shooter (Online TBA) **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** Infinity Ward **Release:** November 4

The Call of Duty series' development is spread across multiple studios, and the last one developed by Infinity Ward, Ghosts, is considered one of the weaker installments. Considering that, the developer has a lot to prove with Infinite Warfare. The change from modern military fiction to the grim sci-fi trappings of something like *Battlestar Galactica* might be what this latest game needs to make Call of Duty feel bold and fresh once more.

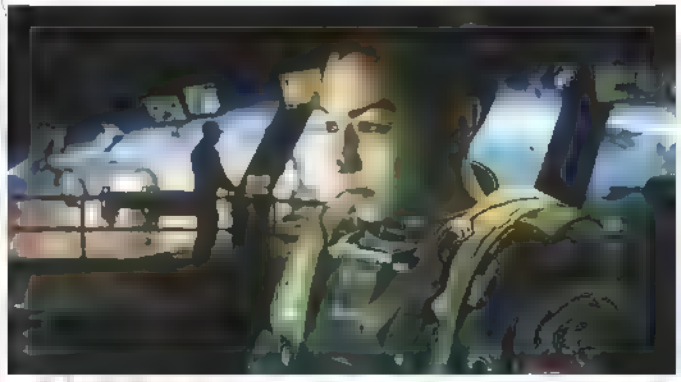
Playing as Commander Reyes, a soldier who suddenly finds himself in charge of what remains of Earth's army, players lead the charge against the sadistic, cruel Settlement Defense Force (SDF). They wage war on moons and asteroids, and even become embroiled in dogfights against a backdrop of stars and exploding battleships.

In a brief demo shown during E3, we watched as Reyes fended off an attack on Geneva, Switzerland, with assault weapons and his comrades. Later on in the same level, Reyes calls a Jackal, a jet capable of space travel, to provide support by machine gun fire on enemies. Shortly after that, Reyes enters the Jackal and breaks atmosphere with an armada of Earth's forces to take down the battleship that launched the assault in the first place. It's easily the most spectacular, un-Call-of-Duty-like thing we've seen in a Call of Duty game since the series made the jump from World War II to the modern era.

To push the series to new heights, Call of Duty is embracing the final frontier. We'll have to wait until November to find out if Infinity Ward's gambit pays off, but it's hard to deny the lofty ambitions powering Infinite Warfare.

» Javy Gwaltney

ETH3n is robotic soldier that's part of your squad. He cares for those around him and fights to be accepted by his squad



Players can tackle side missions, including boarding and destroying enemy vessels

CIVILIZATION VI

07

So many countries, so many customs

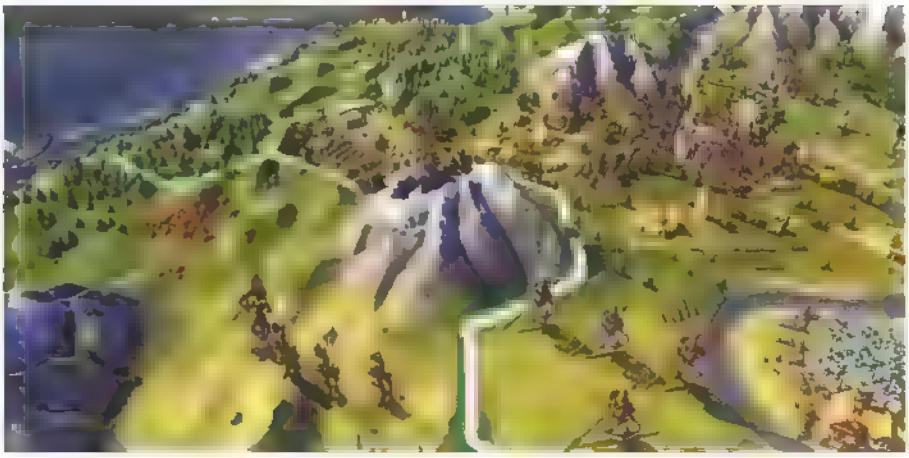
Platform: PC **Style:** 1-Player Strategy (12-Player Online) **Publisher:** 2K Games **Developer:** Firaxis **Release:** October 21

Rome wasn't built in a day, but in Civilization VI you can take Rome from antiquity and into space in less than 24 hours. Civilization fans are used to taking over the world in a variety of ways, but the sixth entry in Firaxis' premier 4X strategy series allows players to customize their nations in a host of new ways.

One of the biggest changes in Civilization VI is the creation of districts. Each district provides your city with bonuses. For example, creating a military district improves your troops' performance in battle, while a scientific district gives you a research buff. These districts take up an entire tile and house specific building types, so establishing a campus district would allow you to build both new libraries and universities. Choosing where to put each district requires strategy, as some tiles are better suited for certain districts. For example, a mountain is a good place to look at the stars, so it is ideal for a science district, and you get a research boost for placing it there.

All that science comes in useful as your civilization researches new technology. However, now there are ways to speed up the research process even if your science skills are low. Each technology has an associated task that allows you to research that technology more quickly, and you can see all of these goals via the tech tree. For example, building a quarry cuts the research time for masonry in half. Meanwhile, killing a few barbarians might speed up the research of arrows.

The tech tree isn't the only only tree you'll get familiar with in Civilization VI. Researching new



governments unlocks various Military, Economic, Diplomatic, and Wildcard slots. Players can research new governmental policies via the new civics tree, and then mix-and-match these policies to create their own ideal government. For instance, you might choose a military policy that increases your attack power against barbarians as well as a philosophical leaning that improves your society's happiness.

The type of government you build is incredibly important when you start interacting with other nations. In the past, most A.I. leaders seemed to operate in a similar manner, but with Civilization VI, Firaxis is giving each leader his or her own random hidden agendas as well as fixed revealed agendas that line up with their historical personalities. For example, Teddy Roosevelt won't be happy if you're needlessly aggressive toward other nations, but Cleopatra won't respect you if you have a small standing army. As you interact with these leaders you slowly learn what makes them tick, or you can send spies into their war rooms in hopes of uncovering their secret agendas.

Civilization VI is full of small rewards and hundreds of easily accomplishable tasks. Taking your empire from the stone age up through the Renaissance and into the space age is a blast, but it's also too easy to lose track of time and find yourself playing well past your bedtime. Better catch up on your sleep before Civilization VI's October release date. **» Ben Reeves**

You can now divide your city into districts, which provides certain bonuses and allows you to build new structures in those districts

BATTLEFIELD 1

With a World War I setting, DICE gets back to Battlefield basics

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online) **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Developer:** DICE **Release:** October 21

While every other shooter seems focused on joining the sci-fi space race, Battlefield is going the opposite direction. Tired of futuristic weapons and exosuit enhancements? The lo-fi World War I firefights featuring biplanes, zeppelins, and even horses is a potent antidote.

Multiplayer is the heart of every Battlefield game, and this entry is no different. In addition to the series' standard conquest and domination modes, DICE has plans for a few new modes. Introduced at E3, Operations is a long-form experience built around a sequence of battles that take place across an entire front. Inspired by the operations that actually took place in WWI, attackers try to push defenders out of an entrenched position. If you do so, your team advances to the next map in the sequence, with the ultimate goal of pushing the defenders all the way back to their base of operation.

Ever since DICE brought destructibility to Battlefield with Bad Company, the studio has tinkered with its approach. Bad Company 2 let you level entire buildings, while subsequent entries toned down the destructibility in favor of more microdestruction opportunities and the set-piece "levelution" moments. With Battlefield 1, destruction takes a grander scale again.

"What we want to do is allow you to destroy all the things you think you should be able to destroy, to a point," says senior producer Alexsander Grondal. "You can't just level everything. It's not fun anymore. It just becomes open ranges and people are just shooting at each other from a distance. There must be some solid objects left for gameplay." The E3 trailer showcases a biplane crashing violently into a windmill, tearing the structure apart. That will actually happen if you kamikaze your plane in a multiplayer match.

The renewed focus on destructibility should perfectly complement the introduction of behemoth vehicles. These tide-changing, multi-man vehicles like the zeppelin, armored train, and dreadnaught battleship work differently in each game mode that incorporates them, but for conquest it comes in as a reinforcement for the team that is lagging behind. "We feel that Battlefield matches are most fun when they are really close, when one team doesn't completely steamroll the other, so bringing that in and helping the losing side get back on their feet is the idea," Grondal says. DICE is still tweaking the exact time the losing team is granted the behemoth, and plans to monitor how players use them in the upcoming alpha and betas.

With the exception of Bad Company 2, DICE typically struggles to create compelling single-player campaigns. Battlefield 1 takes a new direction that abandons a linear story in favor of a collection of scenarios taken from across the timeline of World War I. "The way we wanted to do it is to bring more Battlefield into it," Grondal says. "More vehicles, more variety, more agency, more openness. Battlefield has always been about being multiple, different soldiers all around the world, so that's kind of what we're doing here as well. You can really get some unique perspectives if you play on different sides."

In the lead-up to the October 21 launch, interested fans can try to gain access to the planned alpha and beta tests. **» Matt Bertz**

DEAD RISING 4

09

Frank West comes home for the holidays

Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Action **Publisher:** Microsoft Studios **Developer:** Capcom Vancouver **Release:** December 6

The original Dead Rising was an early showcase for the Xbox 360, packing the screen with hundreds of shambling zombies. Photojournalist Frank West had to deal with those masses while getting the scoop of the century in Willamette, Colorado. Fortunately for him, the local mall was a treasure trove of improvised weapons for the industrious hero, who used swords, mannequin parts, and even CD jewel cases to survive. Sixteen years have passed since Frank painted the walls red, and he's returning to the place where it all started. This time, however, he's not tethered to a shopping center. Mall traffic can be murder, after all.

We start our demo in the heart of Willamette's downtown, which has been decorated for Christmas. With its cobblestone streets and small businesses, it's a charming little place. Or it is if you're able to overlook the crowd of zombies that aimlessly wander around. Frank's not the type to ignore these guys, so I quickly pull out an electric battle axe and get to work. It's a slow, but powerful option, and it slices through the crowd with brutal efficiency. All the while, my hit counter is building up. It's a subtle change from the previous kill-based counter, which governs your special attacks. When I get enough hits, I can activate a special attack. Frank triumphantly lifts the weapon over his head and a massive blast of electricity arcs over the crowd, incapacitating the group in a generously sized area-of-effect attack.

With that group out of the way, I follow my waypoint to the fire station. On the way I pause by a nearby truck and grab its precious cargo: an exosuit. This powered frame allows Frank to use large weapons – like parking meters – and deal out even more damage. I equip a massive flamethrower and roast some zombies along the way. For its special, Frank grabs the closest creep and simply tears it apart. At the station, I photograph a grisly display of hung soldiers, and look for the culprits. I notice a psychopath who's lighting up the undead like yule logs, and decide that Willamette would be better off without him. After a short but intense battle, I tear his fuel tank apart, and the maniac flies into the air and explodes, but not before I whip out my camera and commemorate the occasion with a selfie.

Dead Rising 4 continues the series tradition of refinement, making small player-friendly tweaks with every installment. One of the big improvements I notice is that players can put ranged and melee weapons into special inventory slots, which are assigned to specific button presses. That lets you swing a bat at a nearby group and seamlessly take a few shots with a pistol, for instance, instead of having to mess around with your inventory. Dead Rising fans know how important efficiency can be.

I didn't get a chance to see them in the demo, but Capcom says Dead Rising 4 includes a couple of new zombie types, including freshly turned victims that exhibit super speed, and the Evo, which are ferocious and powerful predators. After seeing how well Frank handles himself, even after all these years, I'm not too concerned for his safety. He's covered wars, you know, so what are a few more zombies? **» *Jeff Cork***

TITANFALL 2

Respawn's second shooter looks deeper, more dangerous

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Developer:** Respawn Entertainment **Release:** October 28

Titanfall suffered no shortage of praise when it launched in 2014. The multiplayer-focused shooter earned kudos for its kinetic combat and interesting pilot-titan battlefield dynamic. But in the months after launch, the game's Achilles heel – a short progression loop – didn't compel many who enjoyed it to keep Titanfall in their regular rotation. The sequel aims to shore up this shortcoming as well as expand its scope with a single-player campaign.

The campaign news should be exciting for every shooter fan considering the core team at Respawn led the creation Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, which many consider to be the best shooter campaign of the last generation. Judging from the trailer, the story focuses on the relationship between the titans and their pilots. Respawn chose to save most of the details regarding this mode for a later date, using E3 to showcase its multiplayer efforts.

Fast-paced action is still at the core of Titanfall 2 competitive play. "I think Titanfall and speed are sort of synonymous, and just that feeling of complete freedom in mobility," says lead multiplayer designer Todd Alderman. "What I want to get is a better overall structure so the game is more predictable and less reactive. So tightening maps, designing abilities that encourage teamwork, and systems to get players to stick together and help each other while they are helping themselves."

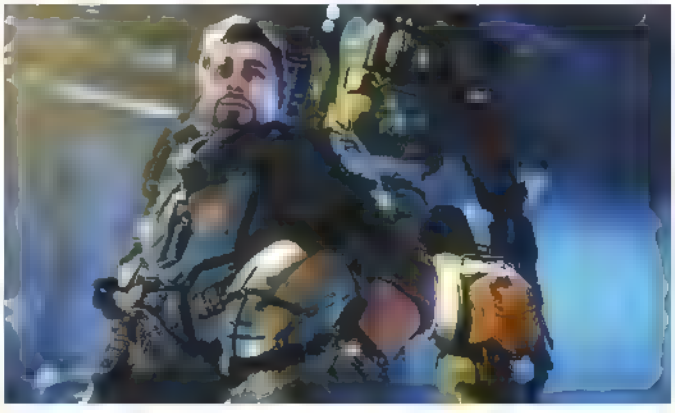
Titanfall 2 introduces a variety of new abilities for both the pilots and Titans. On foot, players now have access to a grappling hook that can quickly vault them up the sides of buildings, a pulse blade that highlights nearby enemies for several seconds, and a hologram pilot that mimics your actions.

Titans have been completely overhauled as well, ditching the models from the last game in favor of six brand new ones. "The way we looked at Titans in this game is sort of like Street Fighter characters," Alderman says. "They are packages that play the same way with limited customization on their combat, but a lot of customization on how they look, sound, and stuff like that."

Three models made their debut at E3. Scorch is the fire Titan, so all his abilities (thermite launcher, fire wall, incendiary traps) are about fire attacks. These effects all stack for increased damage and are great for crowd control or pinning an enemy Titan back. Ion, on the other hand, is armed with a powerful laser beam, tripwire, and the vortex from the original game. The third revealed Titan, Ronin, is much like the Strider class from the first game, armed with the giant sword showcased in the first teaser.

Other changes coming to multiplayer include a new network technology that makes it easier to jump into games with friends, a new system that replaces burn cards, and a deeper progression that should cure the first game's primary ill.

All of these changes show promise, but the biggest challenge facing Titanfall 2 is the glut of year-end competition. Should Respawn execute, perhaps it can stand its ground against Battlefield 1, Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare, Gears of War 4, and expansions for Destiny and The Division. ▸▸ ***Matt Bertz***



PAPER MARIO: COLOR SPLASH

11

Nintendo's plumber makes a splash

Platform: Wii U **Style:** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Intelligent Systems **Release:** October 7

The opening to Nintendo's newest entry in the Paper Mario series seems more like a macabre thriller than a family friendly adventure. One stormy night, Mario is visited by two mysterious hooded figures. These figures turn out to be Toad and Princess Peach, and their message is just as somber as their expressions. Someone recently sent the Princess a disturbing letter. When she opened it, she discovered the letter was actually a toad that had been drained of all its color and then folded into the shape of an envelope. The toad was postmarked from a place called Prism Island, so Mario sets off on an adventure to get to the bottom of this mystery.

Despite this grim intro, the game is still full of the usual Paper Mario charm and wit. When Mario arrives on Prism Island, he meets his new companion for Color Splash, an anthropomorphic paint can called Huey (as in color hue). Many parts of the world have been drained of their color, but thanks to Huey, Mario can repaint them with his hammer, and thus bring them back to life.

During our hands-on E3 demo, we explored a small area and helped rescue several toads who then built a bridge for us into the next zone. While painting objects in the environment, Mario expends a little bit of paint. However, it's easy to replenish his supply by hammering parts of the environment that have already been colored.

Repainted objects also produce various playing cards. Much like the stickers in Paper Mario: Sticker Star, Mario uses these cards during the turn-based battles. Some cards allow Mario to attack with his hammer, while others have him jumping on enemies' heads. Many cards even let Mario attack two or three times in a row, and he can infuse each card with paint to bolster its attack. If Mario is battling weaker enemies, he might choose to paint only half of a card in order to conserve his supply.

During his journey, Mario also collects "thing cards," which are rare cards that summon real-world objects into battle and deal massive damage. One of the thing cards we saw in action teleported our enemies onto the grill of a giant barbecue before flambéing them like well-done steaks.

Color Splash doesn't shake up the Paper Mario formula much, but the new painting mechanic is very satisfying and we're glad to see the franchise returning to console. The Wii U's holiday lineup looks sparse this year. Thankfully, Nintendo fans can safely put Paper Mario: Color Splash on their wish lists.

»» Ben Reeves

Mario uses his hammer to repaint objects in the environment that have been drained of their color

12

GEARS OF WAR 4

A new take on a bloody classic

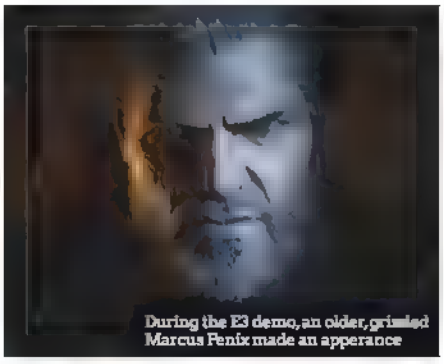
Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Shooter (10-Player Online) **Publisher:** Microsoft Studios **Developer:** The Coalition **Release:** October 11

Gears of War 4 looks to take the series in a new direction while also staying true to its roots, recalibrating the franchise's combat and installing the action set pieces with a fair bit of horror. The slice of campaign we played during E3 demonstrated that The Coalition has a good handle on what fundamental elements make up a good Gears of War game.

The E3 demo provided hands-on time with JD Fenix as he navigated a creepy fort filled with all sorts of nasty creatures ready to tear him and his companions, Kait and Del, to pieces. We spent a fair amount of time wandering through dark and creepy rooms, some of them containing pulsing pink pods filled with dismembered body parts. Later we became embroiled in combat with fast crawler-type enemies called Juvies, capable of screaming for reinforcements, as well as drones, the soldiers of the Swarm capable of wielding weapons.

When the atmosphere in this level switches from horror to action, it does it swiftly and well, with bullets flying everywhere and chainsaws cutting into flesh as grenades turn enemies into red vapor. We stormed through the fort's church, ducking around columns and purple pods that provided temporary cover, to flank enemies and blow them apart with shotguns. One of the best moments from our hands-on session involved shooting a pod hanging from the ceiling so that it crushed three enemies rushing across the battlefield, killing them instantly.

The E3 demo certified that Gears of War 4 is still mostly Gears but with a few new touches and a slight tone shift. These changes might end up making it one of the standout entries in the series come October. ▸▸ *Javy Gwaltney*



During the E3 demo, an older, grizzled Marcus Fenix made an apperance

DAYS GONE

Swarming an open world

Platform: PlayStation 4 **Style:** 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Bend Studio **Release:** TBA

Since 2011's release of Uncharted: Golden Abyss on Vita, Sony Bend has been working on a new intellectual property for PlayStation 4 called Days Gone. That title made its debut not once, but twice during Sony's E3 press conference, and was awarded the honor of closing out the show with a lengthy 10-minute live gameplay demo.

The setup is something gamers are intimately familiar with: a post-apocalyptic open world with a strong focus on survival. Best described as *Sons of Anarchy* meets *World War Z*, Days Gone takes place in the Pacific Northwest, which just happens to be where Sony Bend is located. A good majority of the world is inspired by the wilderness of central Oregon.

Our guide through this scenic-yet-nightmarish place is Deacon St. John, a bounty hunter and former MC of a biker gang. Although he still wears his kutte as a reflection of his past, he now finds himself fighting for survival against flesh-eating, zombie-like creatures called Freakers.

"I remember when the planes fell out of the skies, when the trains stopped running, when the turbines shut down, and the world went dark," St. John says remorsefully in Days Gone's trailer. "I remember when they put up the razor wire, like it was going to stop anything. When the feds ran out of body bags, some of us lost our minds. Some lost more than that. Much more. I remember when we lived by a code, and brotherhood meant something. And living meant more than surviving. I remember how it all went down. Now I don't give a damn about any of that."

St. John sounds like a person hell bent on doing whatever he can to survive. We even see him turn his gun on a man on his knees in the trailer. St. John is often alone in the world; his closest companion is his bike, which plays a vital role in the game, not just for transportation reasons, but to store valuable supplies found along the way.

We don't know how deep the survival concept goes at this point, but it does sound like supplies are limited, right down to St. John having to refuel his bike.

In the E3 demo, we follow him to a sawmill where he believes his latest bounty awaits. A short bike ride down a hill to the sawmill leads to some scavenging. St. John moves slowly through the world, limiting the sound he makes. He raids a chest in a barracks, shoos two wolves away from a human corpse they are munching on, and grabs the oil filter from a rundown truck. The filter is placed on the end of his pistol as a silencer, but it won't do him much good.

As soon as he sees his target, a young Freaker leaps onto him. In the time it takes to melee kill the gnashing-jawed creature, his target has fled to the roof. At this point, we see a little environmental traversal. Climbing looks simplistic but precise. From the rooftop, St. John learns the little Freaker wasn't alone. Dozens of them are on the prowl in the yard below. With his attention diverted, his target gets the jump on them. A tussle ensues and they both plummet to the ground, St. John lands safely. His target's leg is broken.

St. John leaves him for the horde to feed on, and sprints away. The swarm grows in number, almost looking like a tidal wave with bodies tumbling over one another as they sprint toward him. He opens fire with an assault rifle, doing his best to slow them, but they just keep coming. The chase winds through different sections of the sawmill. St. John can slow them up by cutting the rope on a huge woodpile to drop the planks behind him, or by placing an explosive on a support holding logs in place to send them rolling toward them. He can also lower shutters on garages to get a little breathing time, but nothing can stop this huge onslaught – there are too many of them.

St. John unloads thousands of bullets, but he's barely phasing the attack. He eventually finds himself trapped on a water tower with the Freakers approaching from all vectors. That's where the demo ends.

Sony Bend says this is an extreme Freaker attack and players could potentially avoid a situation like this if they play their cards better. They can also flee via bike.

How Days Gone's open world plays out is anyone's mystery, but the swarm concept does give it a unique hook. Like most of Sony's E3 announcements, no release date was given, but the game looked mighty promising in its debut.

»» Andrew Reiner

WATCH DOGS 2

A new face and direction for the series

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal **Release:** November 15

While the original Watch Dogs had an immense amount of pre-release anticipation, the final product didn't live up to many fans' expectations. Ubisoft is well aware of the flaws from the first game, and hopes to address these issues head on with Watch Dogs 2. With a new playable character and the fitting tech setting of San Francisco, the original concept of Watch Dogs might finally be able to flourish.

You play as Marcus Holloway, a hacker branded a criminal by the ctOS 2.0 system in his younger years. Since then, he's developed a deep sense of justice, and has joined DedSec, a hacker faction introduced in the previous game, to prevent these unfortunate circumstances from happening to anyone else. With DedSec, he aims to expose corrupted establishments and target Blume, the makers of the ctOS system that controls and manipulates metropolitan cities.

Watch Dogs 2's Bay Area setting is brimming with vibrancy and is separated into six different regions: downtown San Francisco, civic, coast, Oakland, Marin, and Silicon Valley. Each has its own personality, with the downtown area being more business-oriented, and Silicon Valley being home to mega tech corporations and student campuses. The Bay Area is a haven for hackers in Watch Dogs, and its map is three times larger than the original game.

Entering a busier part of town during the demo, it becomes clear that every NPC is hackable. You can overhear phone conversations, read their text messages, or edit profiles to change their identity. The latter comes with different consequences depending on who you target. For example, if you brand average citizens on the street as wanted criminals, they will be arrested while professing their innocence. If you target a gang leader, a gun fight or car chase might ensue instead. While exploring the open world, you can also initiate mass hacks, which cause a distraction by triggering the phones of an entire crowd at once or disrupting traffic on a larger scale.

Several shops adorn the downtown area, and I lead Marcus into a clothing store where I can

change his attire from head to toe, with a new hat or a fashionable messenger bag. These stores are also considered fast travel hubs, so you can quickly move from one area of the map to the next.

Story missions are discoverable through the DedSec app on your phone, but you can also find key areas and quests by using network hacking, which transforms your vision into black-and-white and highlights destinations of interest in color. By using Marcus' phone, I track down a co-op mission which I play alongside a Ubisoft developer. Watch Dogs 2 offers seamless co-op, meaning you cross paths with others in single-player. We meet up, and with the tap of a button, the two of us form a team. With the new emote system, we wave at each other for basic communication. To complete this mission, we must infiltrate a gang's headquarters where an exchange of digital information is about to take place, and steal the hard drives.

To get there, I hop into a flashy sports car. Driving around the city feels much more refined with precise controls, and you no longer feel like you're skidding on ice like in the predecessor. You can still hack infrastructures while steering through the city, but now more multi-tasking possibilities are available, such as shooting while behind the wheel. This makes car chases more entertaining and less frustrating. With hacking, cars can be controlled remotely, so you can steer, accelerate, or reverse them from a distance. This can be used in creative ways for puzzle solving or to block off a street to slow down a pursuer during a chase.

Upon arrival, I use several of Marcus' tech tools. First, I scope out the area with his flying drone. My teammate and I discuss tactics via voice chat, and we move in stealthily. Our targets have arrived by car, and I inch closer by using cover to stay hidden in this guarded area. I then throw grenade-like zappers to electrocute several foes at once, but soon I'm spotted. This changes up the pace, but it's not a problem. I use close range attacks with my melee weapon, a cue ball attached to string to rhythmically swing at enemies, and my non-lethal taser gun for long range. Finally, we near completion, as my teammate grabs one of the drives and I move in swiftly to take the other during combat. All that remains is to escape the area without meeting our demise.

With a deeper focus on hacking, improved driving mechanics, and neat mechanical contraptions such as a drone and tiny remote-control car with an extendable arm, Watch Dogs 2 is giving players more options and more ways to approach missions. From what I played, the sequel is showing potential, and it's clear that Ubisoft took keen interest in addressing complaints from fans.
» *Elise Favis*

INJUSTICE 2

15

The super showdown returns

Platform: PlayStation 4 Xbox One **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer:** NetherRealm Studios **Release:** 2017

In 2013, the team behind the Mortal Kombat franchise launched Injustice: Gods Among Us. The superhero brawler pitted the most powerful heroes and villains in the DC Comics lineup against each other. Following the release of Mortal Kombat X last year, NetherRealm announced it is once again bringing Batman, Superman, and the other DC characters into the ring with Injustice 2.

The first game introduced a dark storyline where an alternate-reality Superman becomes a tyrannical dictator. The Batman-led insurgency worked with heroes from another universe to take down Superman and imprison him.

Injustice 2 picks up where Gods Among Us left off. A new, unnamed threat is looming and the remaining heroes must decide whether or not they want to free the imprisoned Man of Steel to help fight. The selection of playable characters might hint at the direction they take – Superman was one of the six characters shown during our E3 demo – but for now NetherRealm is remaining quiet on any hints of where else the story could take us. All we know is that the story mode is set to continue the cinematic approach that NetherRealm used with Mortal Kombat, Injustice: Gods Among Us, and Mortal Kombat X.

Injustice 2 plays similar to the first game, but the polish that NetherRealm added with Mortal Kombat X carries over. Improved environmental interactions make the arenas feel more alive. For example, balls rolled throughout the stage following a sequence that saw Atrocitus tossing them at Supergirl. The big, over-the-top stage transitions from Injustice: Gods Among Us return with even more flash.

Whether it's Superman getting tossed through a train car by his adversary or Gorilla Grodd being jettisoned out of a barroom brawl and into the busy streets, getting hit by a van and thrown against a wall to start the battle in a whole new area of the city, intricate stage transitions continue to make these battles feel worthy of the superhero blockbusters that inspired them.

NetherRealm also upgraded the super moves. Injustice's version of Mortal Kombat's powerful mid-match X-ray attacks. Activated by pulling both triggers with a full gauge, these super attacks were already huge in Gods Among Us, but with Injustice 2, the attacks are taken to the next level. Aquaman's super move is particularly brutal; he floods the stage, brings his opponent to the surface, and delivers a quick combo before feeding his opponent to a giant, prehistoric-looking fish and impaling them with his scepter.

The character select screen I saw features 28 slots (22 of which are currently empty), which would be larger than the launch roster of Injustice: Gods Among Us by two fighters. The currently revealed roster includes returning fighters Batman, Superman, and Aquaman, and new challengers Supergirl, Atrocitus, and Gorilla Grodd. Wonder Woman has also been confirmed to return, with Boon telling us that he'd like to see movie skins from the upcoming film appear in Injustice 2.

In addition, Boon hints at a larger scale downloadable-content plan than the studio has ever done. "With Mortal Kombat 9, we had four DLC characters, Injustice had six, Mortal Kombat X had eight," he says. "We are definitely, with every game, trying to extend that DLC even longer."

Though more characters, better mechanics, and bigger battles are good goals to aspire to with a fighting-game sequel, NetherRealm isn't satisfied with just that. The studio is adding an all-new loot system that rewards players with customizable armor and costume pieces for the combatants. This loot is acquired randomly following fights using a randomized drop system. Using these pieces, players can customize the heroes and villains of Injustice 2, not only changing the appearance of the characters, but also augmenting their stats.

Giving a character more powerful blows or higher defense may sound game-breaking for a fighter, but Boon says that throwing off the balance was the plan. That doesn't mean that we won't see a more traditional, more balanced way to play as well. "Where balance comes into play for me is when you're talking about tournament play or you're playing with your buddies on the couch or some kind of scenario where you want an even playing field," he says. "We are obviously going to be including an option to go into 'tournament mode' or 'regulation mode' or something like that. To us, the fun part is going to be, 'Oh you beat me and I'm at level 20 and you're at 18' or something so I have motivation to get cooler gear and come back at you with my better version of my Batman."

With ambitious new features, a bigger character roster, and the same solid gameplay that made the first so popular, Injustice 2 is one to watch as we get closer to release. With so many characters left to reveal and next to no details out there about the story, we're likely to see and hear much more about Injustice 2 as NetherRealm gears up for launch in 2017

» Brian Shea

ABZÛ

New secrets emerge in this beautiful world

Platform: PlayStation 4, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher:** 505 Games **Developer:** Giant Squid **Release:** August 2

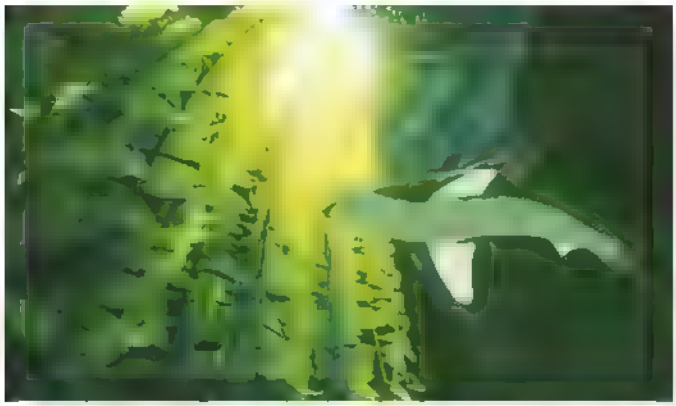
The original spring release date has come and gone for Abzû, but perhaps it's appropriate that the title continues to intrigue yet elude us. Developer Giant Squid keeps pulling back the curtain little by little on the game, and every time it does there's something new and wondrous to ponder.

Even areas I've seen previously now feel fresh and exciting. The predation system finally appeared in the new build I played at E3, and it seems to be balanced nicely. The placid feel of your surroundings doesn't turn into a bloodbath, but it's cool to see fish go about their business – even if you happen to be hitching a ride on them as they chomp on passing prey. Details like this firmly establish Abzû's world, and the numerous graphical details play a large part as well. New, vibrant fish have been added to some areas, large starfish rest on the sandy bottom, and the seemingly suspended marine snow helps give the water a volume and depth.

The world is punctuated with anachronistic touches that form the backbone of the story and your exploration. The shark statues from previous builds are spots where you can meditate and move the camera around to highlight the different species of fish in the area (the developer is considering including a fish index of sorts for users), and the mysterious hieroglyphics and mechanical portals make this world stranger still.

Abzû's position as neither purely an open-world title nor simulator nor action game helps put it in a special place. This extraordinary world changes quite dramatically from serenity to fear, from areas teeming with life to those eerily barren. Myriad colors vibrantly paint these pictures, and Austin Wintory's score is masterfully in tune with everything that goes on.

In a game already filled with imagination, one area in particular in the hands-on demo at E3 further stoked interest. After diving through a coral tier in one of the areas, the protagonist finds herself in another foreign world where the ocean surface drifts silently below her and a dark, unknown beyond is suspended above. In the distance are shadows of temples, with one illuminated in front of her. Swimming curiously toward it and diving into its center, a brilliant light extends and the silhouettes of stingrays burst forth and swim out into the world. It's a wonderful moment that is surely tied to some larger significance of rejuvenating the environment, but what exactly is its place in the game? That's just one of the many mysteries we can't wait to uncover when the game comes out this August. **» Matthew Kato**



Currents act like highways to new areas and the fish use it as part of the ecosystem.

GHOST RECON: WILDLANDS

Co-op cartel busting goes open world

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Shooter (Multiplayer TBA) **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Paris **Release:** March 7

Last year's impressive debut of Ghost Recon: Wildlands left us wondering if it could be the next blockbuster shooter. The concept of throwing four players into the open world of Bolivia and sicking them on the wicked Santa Blanca cartel that turned the country into a narco state is promising, and this year we got to go hands on with the third-person shooter.

Our mission starts with myself and three other ghosts positioned in the vast expanses of the Bolivian countryside. We've gathered in this region of San Mateo to investigate why 300 civilians disappeared last year, never to be heard from again. Outside a small village we each deploy our drones to mark an interrogation target who may have valuable information. Each ghost has binoculars, night vision, and a drone, the last of which can be upgraded with offensive capabilities, improved range, or diversionary tools. Three of us get into sniping position while the fourth moves closer to our target.

The echoes of our shots alert the small encampment, and the mark flees to a nearby truck and drives off down the road. Each target has unique behaviors. While some may turn and engage in the gunfight, others like this cartel worker turn tail and run. I hop on a dirt bike and track him to a gas station, where he gets out on foot and joins a new group of cartel enemies. The other three ghosts start the gunfight while I grab our mark and pull him into a bathroom away from the lead exchange. Gathering intelligence is a critical component of locating high-value targets. You won't likely just stumble on their location; you need to find evidence or interrogate lower-level goons like this guy to discover their whereabouts. He points us toward a large encampment nearby. While reinforcements barrel down on the gas station, we hop into a chopper and vacate the area.

After locating the camp, three of us skydive out of the chopper to a vertical position while the fourth parks. This walled fortress is filled with armed guards; we'll have to be much more cautious while engaging. Two ghosts hunker down in sniping positions and pull out their drones to mark enemies while another ghost and I descend the cliff and sneak into the base. After a series of stealth takedowns, we're spotted and the firefight opens up. We successfully overcome the odds and recover another valuable piece of intel that reveals the location of the madman responsible for making these civilians disappear.

Wildlands' four-player cooperative setup has great potential for tactical play as well as shenanigans. Some fans may bemoan the lack of recent Ghost Recon staples like a cover system, but the guns feel good and we're eager to learn more about the open world and multiplayer offerings in the lead up to the March release. **» *Matt Bertz***

THE LAST GUARDIAN

As the long development cycle ends, the journey is just beginning

Platform: PlayStation 4 **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Japan Studio/genDesign **Release:** October 25

The core of The Last Guardian is undoubtedly the relationship between the boy and the Trico beast. Judging by what I played at E3, the strong foundation of this crucial link is well established in the first 30 minutes.

While trailers up to this point have highlighted the duo's coupled gameplay and emotional bond, this is not the natural order of things. In the game's fictional world, the Trico is a legendary beast of power, alongside the phoenix, griffin, and unicorn. At the start of the game the Trico has been brought to heel, its horns cut, wings broken, and the wounded beast shackled in a dungeon. The boy, who wakes up alongside him also imprisoned for an unknown reason, finds his skin marked with strange tattoos.

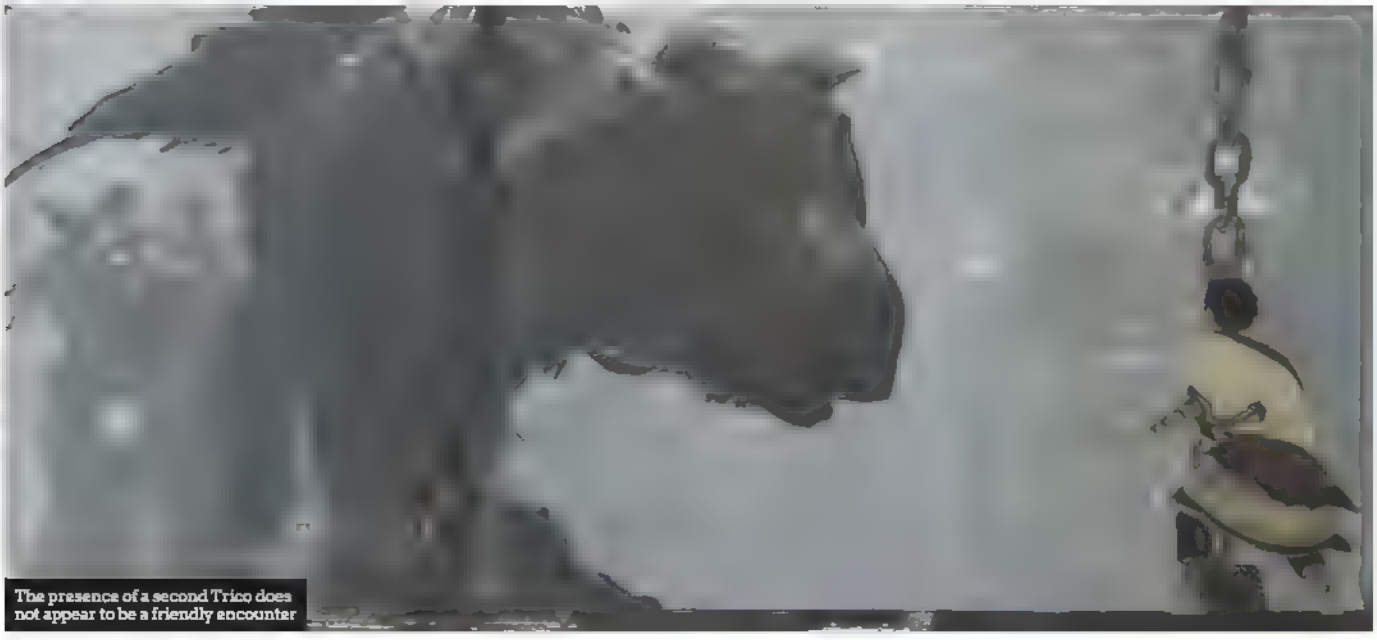
When the Trico wakes up he is hostile to the boy, and this introduction to the beast serves to initiate a connection between the two as the boy removes the spear shafts lodged in the animal and feeds it barrels he finds in the environment. It also establishes the true majesty of the Trico; it growls at the boy and howls in pain, its eyes flashing in multicolor anger. It rears up to its full height and thumps the ground with its paws. The Trico is its own beast and not merely an A.I. servant. Its noises, pacing, and idle animations give it an immediately evident character.

The pair work together to make their way out of the dungeon. The boy climbs on the Trico, cajoles it with food, and calls it to access new areas. Later on the boy finds a mirror from a sarcophagus which somehow reacts with the Trico itself to produce a dazzling ray of light. Hopefully as the game progresses the commands between the pair increase and lead to various gameplay situations while still allowing the two to retain their identities.

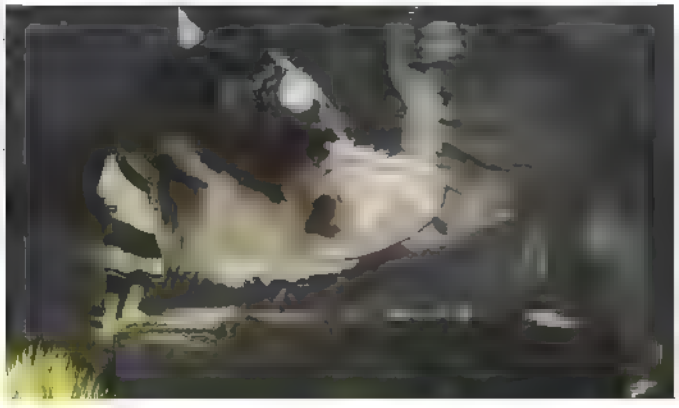
The Last Guardian accentuates contrasts. Not only between the size of the two central characters but also in the cramped interiors (for the Trico) and ascending towers of the mysterious city the pair find themselves in. Emerging from the darkness of the Den of Beasts into the bright sunlight only emphasizes the strange location and the pair's seeming isolation.

Much has been made of the delays to the title, and while its design and feel so far is from an earlier time (the boy sometimes gets caught on the environment, and I fought the right analog camera at times), The Last Guardian was never going to be a title that tried to capture cutting-edge gameplay of the moment – then or now. In a way, that suits the title's own detached aura.

Although I only played the game's first section, the two characters had already formed a bond with each other, and I with them. Only the unknown lies ahead, but I have no doubt it will be a memorable journey. From the start the adventure is narrated by the boy as an adult – it's a recollection that is invariably tinged with the melancholy of remembrance. There can only be sadness and loss ahead. **» Matthew Kato**



The presence of a second Trico does not appear to be a friendly encounter



Unshackling and feeding the Trico goes a long way to making a new friend

WE HAPPY FEW

The delightfully disturbing world of uppers

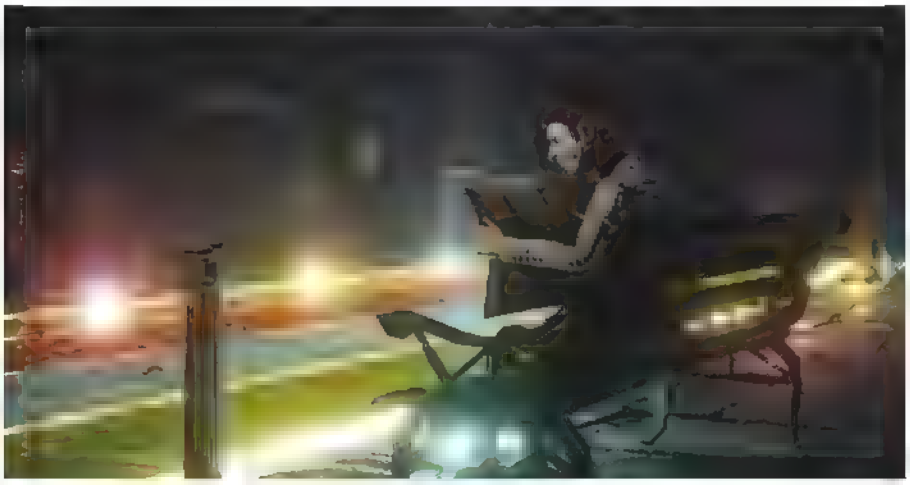
Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Adventure **Publisher:** Compulsion Games **Developer:** Compulsion Games **Release:** Early 2017

Whenever anything from We Happy Few surfaces, it's hard to look away, as the world is so fascinating and downright creepy. The first-person adventure game evokes BioShock comparisons from its art style, but it has its own disturbing premise and visuals.

We Happy Few casts players into an alternate version of the 1960s, where Germany successfully took control of England in World War II. Now everybody is hopped up on happy pills to forget the anguish of their lives. Denizens have ridiculous grins painted across their faces, but behind the biggest smiles are the most sinister secrets, which we saw firsthand when Compulsion Games wowed and captivated the audience with a new trailer at Microsoft's E3 press conference.

The footage is part of We Happy Few's opening, which features a quote by Leo Tolstoy, "Happy people have no history." It then cuts to a personnel office where a man is working and trying to resist the urge to take his uppers, which are called Joy. Throwing the pills away, he starts to have recollections, but soon a lady walks in, reminding him of an upcoming birthday party and grilling him if he's taken his Joy. She pops a pill and her smile takes over her entire face, making her look more psychotic than jubilant.

Walking the halls of this strange world sets up some intriguing and uneasy moments, such as a man screaming to be left alone only to be injected with a syringe to calm him, the most disturbing scene is at the party, where people tweaked out on Joy are beating a piñata. Everybody cheers you on, urging you to raise the broom and hit it. When you finally do, blood comes splattering out. It's not a piñata. It's a dead rat, and the party starts eating it on the table as if it's candy. The haunting scene sets up your journey as a "downer," trying to escape the whacked-out city of Wellington Wells.



To do so, you must survive by scavenging and crafting resources from weapons to food, but a big part is also blending in and not drawing attention to yourself. At times you may need to take Joy to walk among the uppers. Otherwise, the drugged-out townspeople will attack if they spot you, forcing you to fight back or run away. The gameplay bends toward roguelikes, with procedurally generated environments and being forced back to square one after each death.

The final game focuses on several different characters, allowing you to discover what horrible thing each one has done in their past that made them pick a life of drug-induced happiness. When Germany took over England, people had to do some awful things, and Joy is the only way they could live with themselves. After an early beta, Compulsion Games discovered so many people were intrigued by these stories and the world's lore that it's taking extra time to create special narrative-focused levels.

Seeing how demented things get and discovering why Wellington Wells needs drugs to deal with its dirty deeds is where the intrigue lies. We're hoping the full journey tells compelling enough tales to make facing the trials of escaping worth the effort, but if the E3 trailer is anything to go by, Compulsion Games is on the right track. If you want to get a taste of the gameplay, a portion of the game is currently available on Steam Early Access, Xbox One Game Preview, and GOG.com.

» ***Kimberley Wallace***

FINAL FANTASY XV

Taking on Titan

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One **Style:** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** Square Enix **Release:** September 30

The lead-up to Final Fantasy XV has been long and torturous for the series' legion of die-hard fans, but the game is finally nearing launch. While the stage demo at Microsoft's press conference was rough thanks to an overall lack of context and Noctis getting repeatedly knocked over, I went hands-on with the same sequence and found it much more enjoyable as a player than a viewer.

The Trial of Titan sequence that appeared on stage was an abridged version of what I played. The full version features Noctis and Gladiolus venturing toward Titan, one of the enormous Astrals players can eventually summon. On the way, the two take on a handful of foot soldiers. The real-time combat showcased in Final Fantasy XV is smooth and intuitive. Though I had never played the game prior to this demo, I chained together attacks and dispatched enemies with relative ease.

Following that introductory encounter, Noctis and Gladiolus head toward a clearing where Titan awaits. Titan telepathically speaks to Noctis, which the protagonist takes exception to. He decides he's had enough and the battle commences. Titan throws his massive palm toward Noctis, but our hero stops it with his sword before parrying to deal minor damage to the massive adversary. The blocks and parries are done with button prompts, a decision that feels a little out of place within the structure of the free-flowing combat of the game, but it is only a few brief moments over the course of the larger battle.

Following the parry, Noctis and Gladiolus realize they're outmatched. With only half of the party there (Noctis says Ignis and Prompto are on their way), the two flee to higher ground. As they attempt to escape the low pit where Titan is, the Astral smashes the ground, sending the duo flying. Noctis and Gladiolus recover and climb to a higher platform to help even the odds.

There, Noctis continues parrying Titan's attacks while dodging sweeping punches with his warp ability. As the giant drags his hand along the ground, I evade it by warping to the side of a cliff to allow the huge arm to sweep beneath me, then attack the opening with a powerful warpstrike. The resulting combo chips away at Titan's health, but it's doing so little damage that taking down the creature feels like an impossible feat.

That's okay, though, as this is more about stalling until the rest of the party arrives. After several minutes of dodging and attacking, the cavalry arrives in the form of Ignis and Prompto. With the four friends reunited, Noctis dodges once more to create an opening. This time, rather than using warpstrike, I make Noctis fall to the ground and command the group to cast the powerful ice spell Blizzara.

The combined power of the four friends is enough to freeze Titan's arm completely, which I then shatter using a powerful blow from Noctis. Titan is down, but not completely out. However, the demo I'm playing comes to an end just as it appears the next phase of the boss fight is about to begin.

Though I would have rather played an open-area sequence such as what was showcased through Final Fantasy XV's earlier demo, Episode Duscae, I enjoyed seeing how the developers are potentially handling the series' enormous boss fights given the new battle system. Though this wasn't the best way to fully understand what the game is all about, I enjoyed my time playing Final Fantasy XV at E3 and look forward to seeing how all the pieces fit together this September. **» Brian Shea**

Leviathan is another Astral that you can earn in Final Fantasy XV

FOR HONOR

Winning the war one grueling battle at a time

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal **Release:** February 14

After debuting For Honor with a head-lopping four-versus-four multiplayer demo at E3 2015, Ubisoft returned to this year's E3 raring to show off the robust single-player offerings. We sliced and stabbed our way through knights and samurai warriors alike in a pair of levels from For Honor's three-pronged story campaign, and walked away impressed with the methodical swordplay.

Knights-versus-Vikings-versus-samurai may seem like a silly premise for a video game, but For Honor's combat is no joke. Although the game commonly gets dumped into the hack-and-slash bucket, don't expect to auto-hop between enemies while unleashing flurries of attacks with impunity like you can in the Arkham series or Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor. My first touchstone for For Honor's slow and meticulous combat was the Dark Souls series, but once I started to understand the depth of the mechanics, the action reminded me more of Bushido Blade. Though For Honor thankfully doesn't feature as many one-hit kills as the long-forgotten fighting game, every blow matters, and every swordfight can end in your demise.

At the heart of For Honor's swordplay lies the stance mechanic; when dueling an opponent, you switch between a left, right, and high stance via the right analog stick. Matching your foe's stance will automatically block their attacks, but that's true for your enemy as well. As such, combat becomes a brutal dance, as you circle your enemy, mirroring their stance to block their strikes then shifting to a new (and hopefully unexpected) stance to land blows of your own. For Honor also takes into account the weight and physics of your character, so stringing together an attack from the left and then the right is more fluid than performing two consecutive attacks from the same side. From there, the game layers in light and heavy attacks, shield breaks, dodges, and area-of-effect attacks, along with environmental hazards like fires, spiked surfaces, and ledges that you can dump unguarded foes over.

The depth of For Honor's combat takes a good while to get used to, but the lengthy single-player campaign should give you plenty of practice before jumping into the multiplayer waters. We played through two complete levels during our 30-minute demo. The first, entitled Lords and Cowards, put us in the boots of the knight faction's unnamed hero, the Warden, and tasked us with defending a castle from a rival division of invading knights. The second mission, Up the Beach, put us on offense as a Viking raider, laying siege to a samurai stronghold.

Both missions served up a string of satisfying one-on-one and group encounters to test our mettle. Basic soldiers can be cut down with a single strike, or sliced through in droves with swinging area-of-effect attacks. However, higher-ranked foes demand patience and careful thought, as they have all the same attacks and abilities at their disposal as you do. Each faction has its own play-style (knights deal in measured sword strikes while Vikings prefer savage axe swings), and each enemy type has its own attributes that govern their strength, stamina, and speed. Though Ubisoft wouldn't confirm or deny specifics, we suspect many of the enemy types will show up as playable classes in For Honor's multiplayer based on how unique and balanced they feel.

Ubisoft says For Honor's story campaign takes players through missions for all three factions, allowing us to see the conflict from all sides while fleshing out the larger story. The narrative embraces the grim tone of shows like *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*, but the combat is clearly king. Whether in the story-driven campaign or on the competitive battlefield, players will live or die by based on their skills with a blade. **» *Jeff Marchiafava***

If Vikings fighting samurai seems preposterous, that's because it is – but it's still a lot of fun

THE UNSPOKEN

22

World of wizardry

Platform: Rift **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Oculus Studios **Developer:** Insomniac Games **Release:** Holiday

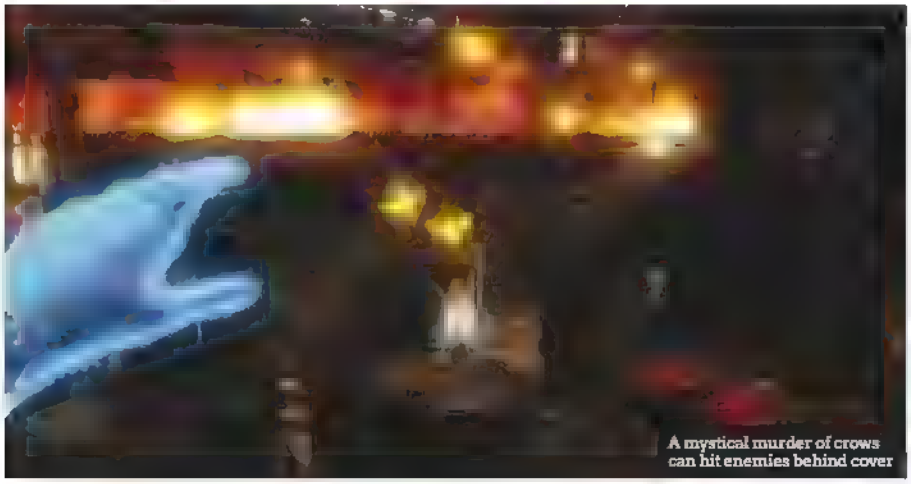
Insomniac is betting big on virtual reality this year, and its most promising title delivers one of gaming's greatest fantasies. Be honest, you've always wanted to fling fireballs or blast bolts from your hands. The Unspoken lets you do just that.

Set up as an arena battle between wizards, players enter the match with a default attack spell and a shield. These and more advanced skills are determined by class. In our demo, we were equipped with a fireball that could be charged and tossed at our foe.

Teleporting to pedestals around the arena lets players take cover, gain a height advantage, and collect crystals that power more advanced spells. Folding a paper airplane and tossing it launches a divebomber. Hammering an arcane anvil results in an enchanted sphere.

The Unspoken can be played seated, but works great as a standing experience. Peeking out from behind cover, leaning for a better angle, and throwing spells sidearm all work and feel great.

The Unspoken is fast-paced and engaging, giving us our first taste of how the fighting genre might develop in virtual reality. Whether you want to be Harry Potter or Harry Dresden, this is one to watch for once the Oculus Touch controllers are available. **» Michael Futter**



A mystical murder of crows can hit enemies behind cover

Store up enough gems and you can summon a golem to end the match

TACOMA

23

Floating in a most peculiar way

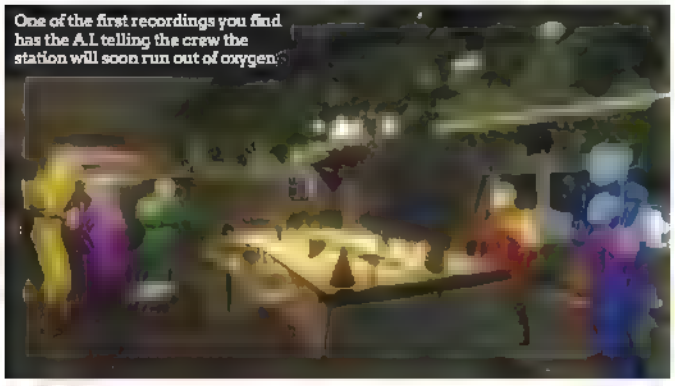
Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Adventure **Publisher:** Fullbright **Developer:** Fullbright **Release:** 2017

The sci-fi follow-up to the indie darling Gone Home, Fullbright has a lot of its reputation staked on its sophomore game, Tacoma. Luckily, the E3 demo we saw of the game suggests the developer is up to the task.

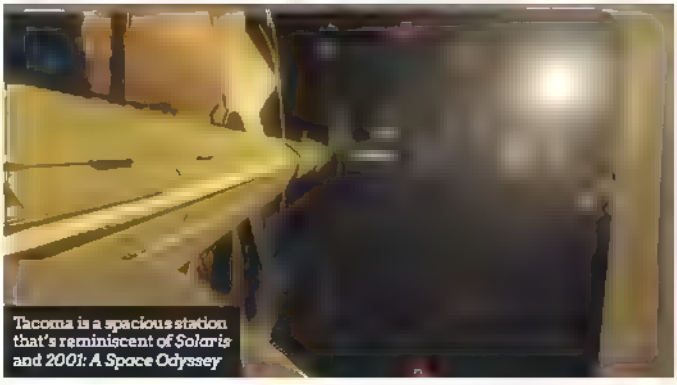
In an opening that deftly combines the best parts of *Alien* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, we watched as protagonist operations engineer Amy enters space station Tacoma through a long metal tube bathed in red light. After zooming down toward an airlock, she plays basketball in zero-G before getting on with her mission of determining what happened to the missing crew of the station.

The slice of gameplay that followed shows Amy exploring the station and interacting with holograms of the crew, recorded sometime before their disappearance. Earlier recordings showed them talking about mundane things, like paperwork and how to bake a cake, but the last recording revealed Tacoma suffering some kind of mechanical failure with the station's A.I., Odin, informing the crew that they have 50 hours left before Tacoma runs out of oxygen.

The demo left us with a lot of enticing questions. What happened to the crew? Did the A.I. kill them? Did they find a way off the station? How does Amy fit into all of this? We'll have to wait until next year to find out the answers, but either way Tacoma is shaping up to be a promising and tense sci-fi mystery and one of our most anticipated of next year. **» Javy Gwaltney**



One of the first recordings you find has the A.I. telling the crew the station will soon run out of oxygen



Tacoma is a spacious station that's reminiscent of *Solaris* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR III

An RTS classic returns to the battle

Platform: PC **Style:** 1-Player Real-Time Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** Sega **Developer:** Relic **Release:** 2017

The real-time-strategy genre may be in decline thanks to the continuing popularity of MOBAs, but few franchises are held with the same reverence as Dawn of War. Dawn of War III goes against the grain by weaving together different elements from the once-proud genre with the threads of a tireless IP.

Dawn of War III combines some of the elements from the first two games in new ways. The campaign focuses on three classic 40K factions: Space Marines, Orks, and Eldar. Base building returns to the game after being absent in the second title, but there are still swarms of enemies to cut through and elite units to lead your troops. Perhaps the most impressive unit we've seen so far is the Imperial Knight, a hulking titan that packs massive chain guns that can decimate an infantry army in seconds and rocket barrages for when it runs into heavier fare. The other factions have their own "walker" units as well, with the Orkish Gorkanaut and the Eldar Wraithknight rising to meet the challenge.

Managing your elite-unit cooldowns and abilities alongside your rank-and-file troop movement and attack should lead to a nice mix of macro and micromanagement. The fun doesn't end at elite units though. The game also features traditional endgame superpowers that allow you to end the conflict with style. We saw the Space Marine orbital cannon in action, gobbling up and obliterating everything in a player-controlled path.

Destructible cover adds a nice element to skirmishes over valuable terrain, and once it's gone, it's gone – providing an incentive to the "first to fight" commander willing to send units out aggressively to take valuable defenses before they are inevitably blown to pieces. These temporary bastions can be a big benefit when you're fighting over an important resource node.

We won't see Dawn of War III until 2017, but if you're looking for a reason to be excited about the future of the RTS genre, it may be worth the wait. » **Daniel Tack**

Elite units come with a variety of powers and cooldowns

Expect to see many units wrapped up in battle in Dawn of War III

THE SURGE

Sci-fi melee mayhem

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Focus Home Interactive **Developer:** Deck 13 **Release:** 2017

Deck 13 made a name for itself with the Dark Souls-esque Lords of the Fallen, and now those melee lessons are being applied to a far more futuristic setting. While plenty of Souls-style staples appear in The Surge – like unforgiving, tight battles – the future setting allows Deck 13 to do far more than just strap chainsaws and robo-suits onto a character and throw them up against big bad battlebots. (Although, you can expect that, too.) Instead of the popular doom and gloom of dungeons and catacombs, expect warehouses, factories, and strange alien worlds.

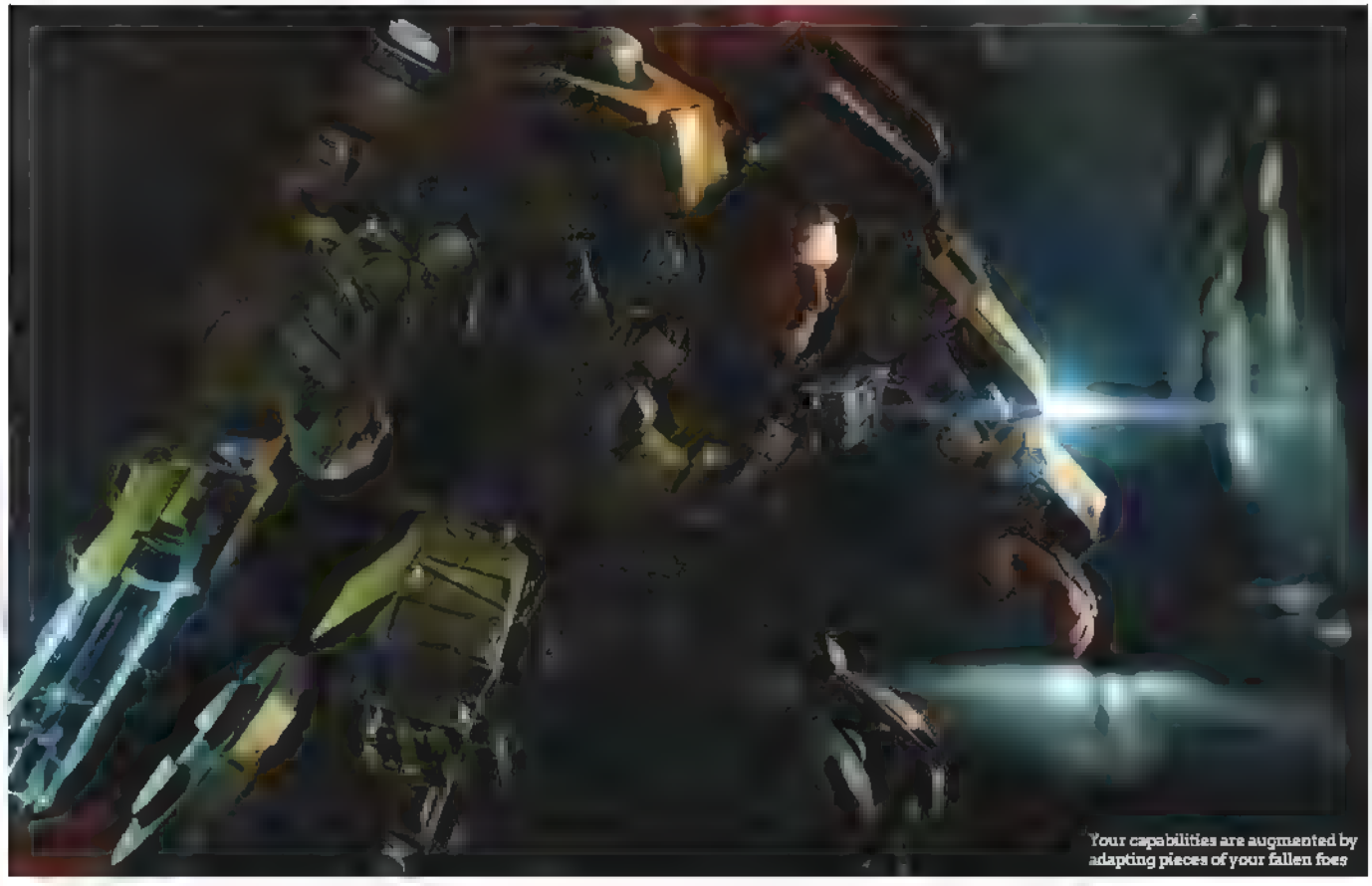
Dangerous environments, challenging-but-fair combat, and picking up on enemy patterns are all core aspects of The Surge. While the future setting provides many new improvements to human life, it also comes with its own perils and pitfalls, which the player becomes familiar with almost immediately when left to fend for themselves against man and machine.

Explore a decidedly different environment for the Souls-like The Surge

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of The Surge is the modular upgrade systems and character progression. You actually cut, saw, and bash off bits and pieces of your opponents, ripping out their technology to adapt it for your own needs. Players can also target specific areas of an enemy. Attacking an opponent's arm to disable a plasma chainsaw or knocking out their legs to prevent mobility are just a few of the decisions you have to make on the fly. The system encourages testing different strategies for enemies packing a variety of deadly weapons and abilities.

Players can expect difficulty to be on par with Lords of the Fallen, with plenty of secrets to find along the way. Unlike Lords of the Fallen's class-based beginnings, everyone starts with the same core to work with in The Surge, and can branch out as they move into the game.

While Lords of the Fallen stood on the shoulders of the Souls series, it was a surprisingly solid title. With The Surge, I'm curious to see what else Deck 13 can bring to the table to make it stand out. **» *Daniel Tack***



Your capabilities are augmented by adapting pieces of your fallen foes

STAR TREK: BRIDGE CREW

26

Welcome to Starfleet

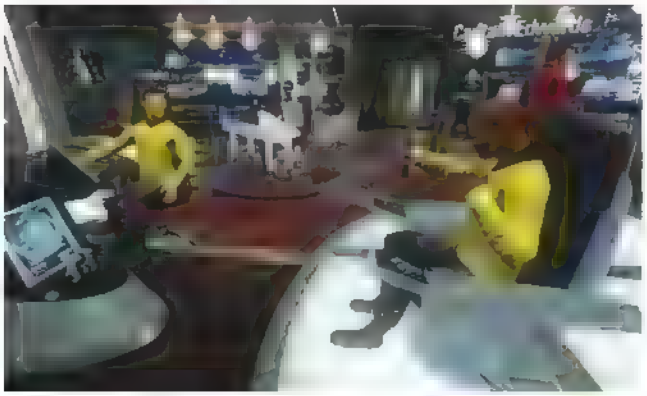
Platform: PSVR, Rift, Vive **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Simulation (Online TBD)
Publisher: Ubisoft **Developer:** Red Storm **Release:** Fall

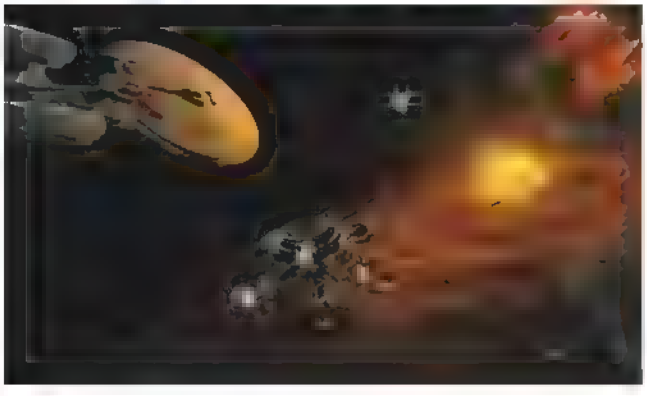
Seated at the engineer's station on the Federation starship *U.S.S. Aegis*, a smile crawls across my face as I scan the bridge. The Oculus Rift transported me to a location that I always wanted to visit, and it looks fantastic. The view out the window is stunning, giving me a look at a colorful star cluster. At the helm's station to my left sits *Game Informer* editor-in-chief Andy McNamara. We wave to each other, and I realize I'm wearing a red shirt. To his left is another player assigned to the tactical station. Behind us is the captain, assumed by someone from Red Storm's development team.

The captain receives a signal from Starfleet, and issues an order to Andy to move us into position near the space station. A scan reveals significant damage to the sprawling complex. Over a dozen survivors are stranded on it. Andy brings us in closer, tactical pinpoints the first pocket of survivors, and I teleport them aboard. This action raises the attention of a Klingon Bird of Prey. I raise our shields, tactical opens fire, and Andy steers us clear of danger as I fire up the warp coils. Thanks to our captain's guidance, we rescue everyone and escape unscathed.

The gameplay in Bridge Crew is simple, and similar in concept to games like Space Team and Artemis. Each crew member interacts with a terminal outfitted with a variety of functions. That's all there is to it, yet it's fun and a true test of teamwork. Our time with the game is short, but Red Storm says the game offers a story-based campaign, as well as a mode called Ongoing Missions that procedurally generates new scenarios. While Ubisoft isn't talking online functionality yet, Bridge Crew can be played solo with NPC companions in three seats.

We won't have to wait long to explore undiscovered space in VR, as Ubisoft has set a fall release for Bridge Crew on Rift, Vive, and PlayStation VR. **» *Andrew Reiner***





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DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

Finding balance in a war-torn world

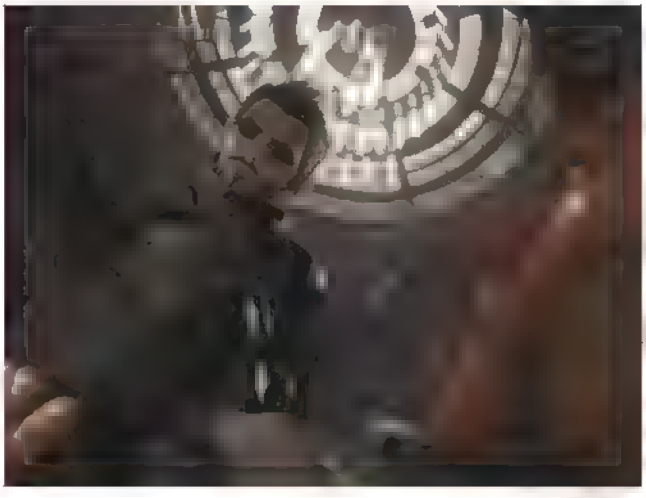
Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
Publisher: Square Enix **Developer:** Eidos Montreal **Release:** August 23

The year is 2029, and society struggles to come to terms with a horrific and confusing event known as the Aug Incident, a global catastrophe that caused individuals with mechanical augmentations to go berserk. With the industry of cybernetics nearing collapse, Adam Jensen no longer works for Sarif Industries, instead joining an anti-terrorism group called Task Force 29. He does, however, have his own agenda: hunting down the puppeteers of the Aug Incident.

Mankind Divided brings more balance between action and stealth than its predecessor. Combat is beefed up, with smoother shooting mechanics and more augmentations that are an asset to a guns-blazing playthrough. For example, the Titan Shield transforms Jensen into a walking tank, and his nano blade, which was used in Human Revolution for takedowns, can be charged and shot out to explode into tiny fractals like a bomb. Stealth is still a polished tactic, with the return of cloaking, along with new augmentations such as your non-lethal PEPS gun-arm, and Tesla that shoots darts out of your knuckles to incapacitate several enemies at once from a distance.

Hacking makes a return, with a more refined mini-game and the inclusion of remote hacking, where you can disable laser beams, cameras, and turrets for a limited time.

Mankind Divided has many layers to its gameplay, and even with a refined combat system, stealth doesn't feel neglected. When it comes to boss fights, you can approach them in multiple ways, including defeating them non-lethally. **» *Elise Favis***



BATMAN: A TELLTALE SERIES

Shaping the man behind the mask

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC, Mac, iOS, Android **Style:** 1-Player Adventure **Publisher:** Telltale Games **Developer:** Telltale Games **Release:** TBA

From afar, Gotham's night sky paints a scene of tranquility, offering all onlookers a stunning view of a city with many secrets to tell. The monolithic Wayne Tower lords over it as a spectacle of wealth and power; it, too, holds many secrets. This is the first shot in Telltale's Batman, an episodic series that focuses on Bruce Wayne and the people of Gotham just as much as it does Batman and his crazy toys.

The shot of the city transitions to a platoon of masked men, each armed with assault rifles, entering Gotham's city hall. They're organized, but sloppy, triggering an alarm within seconds of stepping into the building. They're trying to break into an office, and even brought a chainsaw to cut through its heavily fortified door.

A shot outside of one of city hall's windows shows a billboard that reads, "Harvey Dent for mayor." Dent's image casts a large smile – the smile of just one man. Batman descends onto the billboard and attaches his grappling hook to city hall. He ziplines over to the building, crashes through a window, and takes down one of the robbers all in one fluid motion. It's a nice introduction to the Caped Crusader, voiced by Troy Baker.

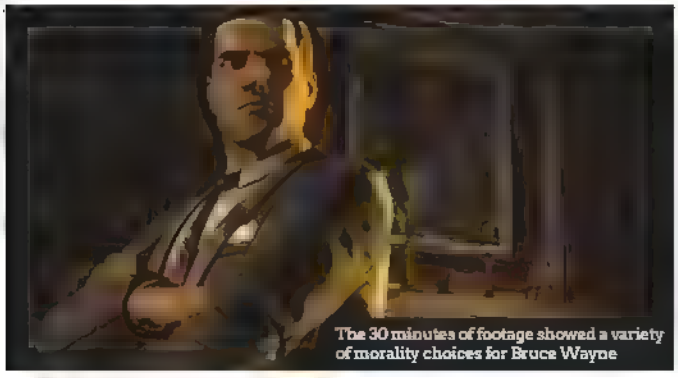
His noisy entrance alerts the other guards, but he's still capable of taking down a few of them by sneaking through the sea of office cubicles. All of the action is handled through quick-time events, such as analog-stick swipes and timed button presses.

Batman dispatches the robbers with ease, knocking the last one through the desired office door. We don't get a good look at what the robbers are after, but we believe it's a device on the table – a device we see Catwoman steal seconds later. Batman gives chase and a battle ensues on the rooftop. Gotham City's police and Commissioner Gordon complicate matters, leading to a dramatic and acrobatic escape down the outside of city hall. The cinematography for this sequence is excellent, giving us exciting and scenic views of the action, something we haven't seen much from Telltale in other game series.

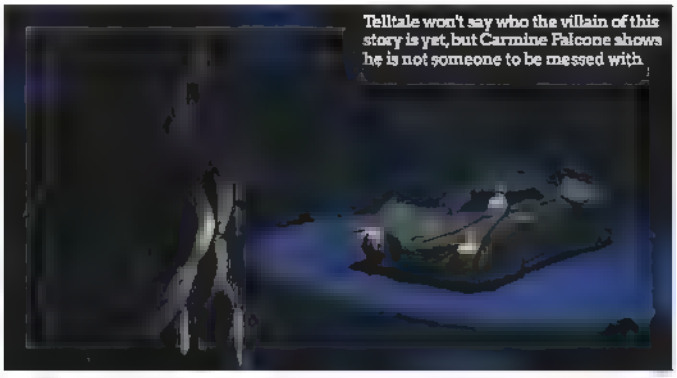
The demo then shifts gears to an extravagant party at Wayne Manor. Bruce is holding a fundraising banquet for Dent, and is the biggest backer of his campaign. Harvey towers over Wayne, almost looking like an ex-football linebacker. Alfred, Bruce's butler, brings distressing news: Carmine Falcone has arrived at the party. Wayne asks Dent why he would invite a criminal like Falcone to the party. At this point, player choice comes into play, and it would appear the player is given a degree of freedom in shaping Wayne's allegiances in Gotham. Falcone wants Wayne's support, and it would appear he can give it based on the conversation options on offer. Our demoer played a heroic and virtuous version of Wayne, which led to a heated confrontation and Falcone threatening death.

In total, I saw 30 minutes of the first episode of Batman. The wealth of quick-time events was a turnoff, and the banquet was a bit of a slog in the early stages, but the moral jockeying of Wayne was interesting. Should it allow darker choices, it could produce a much different Batman story than we've seen before.

» *Andrew Reiner*



The 30 minutes of footage showed a variety of morality choices for Bruce Wayne



Telltale won't say who the villain of this story is yet, but Carmine Falcone shows he is not someone to be messed with

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

Testing morals with tense choices

Platform: PlayStation 4 **Style:** 1-Player Adventure **Publisher:** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Quantic Dream **Release:** TBA

We first learned about Kara when Quantic Dream presented an emotional tech demo in 2012. Kara is an android who becomes self-aware during her assembly in a factory. The moving video had us contemplating what makes us human. Now, Kara is featured in her own full-fledged game.

Detroit: Become Human is a careful balance of choice and consequence, with a string of outcomes that only you have control over. Taking place in a near-future world, androids are companions, workers, and aids to our day-to-day life, but it turns out they are more human than society realized.

Just like past Quantic Dream games, Detroit: Become Human uses quick-time action events and gives you a limited amount of time to respond in dialogue, playing out like an interactive movie. Narratively, the game is structured similarly to Heavy Rain. You play as several different characters, and if one dies, they stay dead, altering the story rather than having the character's arc abruptly end.

Kara is one of many playable characters in Detroit: Become Human. In the E3 demo, we saw the world through Connor's eyes, a cool and calculated android who works alongside the police to track down deviant androids that have become a danger to themselves and others. Androids are meant to be emotionless, but it soon becomes clear this is not the case.

Connor is sent by the police to dissuade an android who has taken a young girl named Emma hostage on a rooftop. Entering Emma's home, you see her frazzled mother being dragged out, screaming and kicking, and telling the officers they shouldn't have sent an android. Connor, whose expression remains neutral and cold as ice, continues on his way inside.

Each character you play has his or her own set of unique abilities and skills. Connor's are built specifically for investigation purposes, to help him solve crimes. For example, glimpsing at a photograph, he can swiftly identify each individual in a matter of seconds.

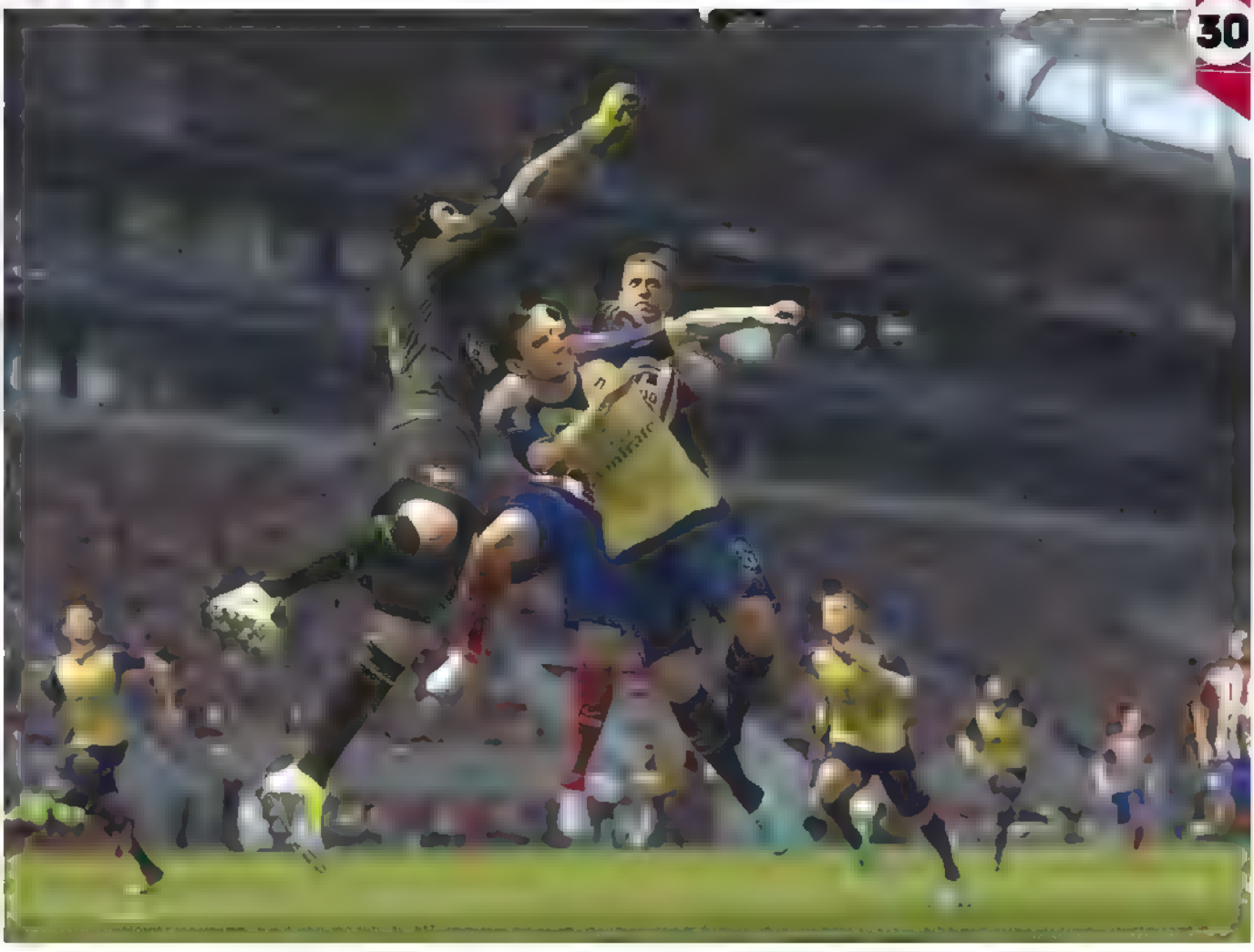
By reconstructing scenes, he can generate ghostly outlines of past scenarios, giving a better idea of someone's previous actions or where objects originated from. When looking through an open briefcase or by examining the father's corpse that's riddled with broken glass, Connor determines that a gun was stolen and that the android killed the father. Environmental clues are also scattered around. By entering Emma's room, you uncover a tablet that plays a video of the young girl and the android happily together, which informs you of the android's name: David.

While there is plenty to look at, you could just as easily step outside onto the roof instead of peeking around, but going straight to the conflict could have consequences. With Connor's HUD, you can calculate your risk of success or failure, and this fluctuates with your actions. Time is of the essence, and the clock continues to tick. If you take too long, negative outcomes could occur.

Stepping onto the roof, the tension rises immediately. The deviant android clutches Emma tightly at the edge, and Connor approaches slowly not to panic him. "Do you have a gun?" David asks. You can lie or tell the truth, and your decision will either dissuade or persuade him. You can rationalize with him, demand he releases Emma, reassure him, or empathize by saying you're not so different. With the push of a button, you can shoo away the SWAT team's helicopter hovering above.

Emma and the deviant android can be saved or killed depending on your choices, and even your life may be in danger. Without gaining his trust and approaching too quickly, David leaps to his death with Emma. You receive a "mission succeeded" or "mission failed" prompt when wrapping up, but this black-and-white outcome will not necessarily seep into other sections of the game.

While Detroit: Become Human is a similar mold to Quantic Dream's past titles, there's an intriguing story underneath that looks promising. Connor as a character so far is dull, but because this is a story about robots coming to terms with their emotions, I expect him to open up and develop as the narrative progresses. While I didn't get to see Kara in action, I'm eager to continue her journey as well. **» Elise Favis**



PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 17

Pro Evolution Soccer enters its golden generation

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Sports (Online TBA) **Publisher:** Konami **Developer:** PES Productions **Release:** Fall

PES 2016 was the best entry in the series since before the latest home consoles even came out. This year's game takes concrete steps to improve the franchise's standing by addressing specific user complaints. More than that, the game also iterates on one of its core components, the gameplay fidelity.

Players are not only easy to control, but their responsiveness means you spend less time in animations. The minute accuracy in how they address the ball also makes them better dribblers, passers, and shooters. It emboldens you to push your players to the limit and also embrace the game's multitude of new tactics.

Two offensive and defensive presets can be set to the d-pad (along with those from last year) that cover a range of concepts like tiki-taka, the false 9, and high-pressure Gegenpressing. Switching between these on the fly can take getting used to, but they let you adapt to what your opponent throws at you. Speaking of which, Konami is touting an adaptive A.I. feature that claims to learn if you keep passing to a particular player, for instance.

Help also comes in the form of keepers with better reflex saves and defenses that are more attuned to the through ball. Physical play returns, but this time with better refs to call the necessary fouls. In general the game is a touch slower, but I wouldn't say it's slow. Perhaps this is a cost of the control you feel between the player and the ball, along with the accuracy of their touches. All combined, I felt more creative than ever, but I wasn't scoring three of four goals every time, which is good.

Last year PES was hampered by a delayed roster update, which meant summer transfers weren't included until much later. Konami is promising a day-one update as well as weekly ones (both for online and off), which should bolster all modes.

The transformation of the Master League career mode continues with a more detailed transfer process. Teams have a split budget between transfer fees and player wages, team directors give advice during negotiations, and deadline day has its own time element to add drama. The players now have skills as well as abilities, more than double the roles, and a reworked training system to further define and aid their development.

The series' online fantasy-soccer mode, MyClub, now includes an auction house for scouts. A scout doesn't directly deliver a specific player, but combining the right agents and scouts will give users access to the players they seek. The mode also includes online scouting reports of opponents and new tutorials.

In the series' past, more control and depth meant more complicated inputs. They were there if you could use them, but they also put a barrier between players and some of the beauty of the game itself. Now the game is offering more control and expression – whether in gameplay or modes – without being overly complex or inaccessible. That's a very liberating feeling. » **Matthew Kato**

GWENT: THE WITCHER CARD GAME

The popular tavern game goes big

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** CD Projekt Red **Developer:** CD Projekt Red **Release:** 2017

Despite offering an expansive open world filled with monsters, political rivalries, and loot, many players of G.I 's 2015 game of the year award winner The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt spent more time in taverns playing a card game cal ed Gwent. CD Projekt Red noticed the intense following the pub game got, so it took the natura next step in creating a stand-alone digital card game that doubles down on the formula.

Gwent: The Witcher Card Game plays much like the version that appeared in The Witcher 3, with a few minor but important tweaks. First, you are allowed to mulligan up to three cards at the start of every compet tive match instead of two. Second, your deck is limited to four hero cards. From there, the developers rebalanced the action to make sure certain play styles (like aggressively relying on spies in the first round) aren't overpowered, while improving the visuals and user interface. Each card has a premium version that is animated and interactive, allowing the player to change the angle of the card with an analog stick or mouse to appreciate the model. New abilities, cards, and mechanics are coming to Gwent as well.

Competitive play is grouped by skill tiers that players can climb or descend based on their performance while in the groupings. Beyond head-to-head play, CD Projekt Red is flesh ng out the experience with offline, 10-hour campaigns for each of the four decks (Northern Realms, Scoia'tel, Skel ge, and Monsters) complete with top-down maps to explore and untold stories starring both new and well-known characters from the universe. The stories play out in fully voiced comic book-style cutscenes. As with any Witcher game, choice and consequences play a role in the adventures.

In the demo we watched, Geralt tags along with a mercenary named Falibur and an elven guide named Milaen. The group escorts a smal girl named Torina who they found next to a slaughtered guard in a roadside tavern. From here they venture into the open world, passing by an old elven ruin. Here the player can choose to explore or disregard the ruin. Exploration yields a new Gwent card called Scorch, which is an ancient elven recipe for a fire bomb.

As the group approaches a town, the girl suddenly transforms into a demon named Zaphire. A Gwent battle ensues in which the player can test out the new card. As the battle plays out, characters placed on the board will react to certain situations with voiced dialogue.

The depth of the Gwent experience for this standalone game is impressive for a free-to-play game. CD Projekt Red says it's still fine-tuning the microtransaction model, but stressed that they don't want it to turn nto a grind fest for those who choose not to spend money. That sounds like a good place to start, but whether or not the base game stands up to head-to-head play wil, be the true test of this Hearthstone competitor. **» Matt Bertz**

NIOH

A lot of soul

Platform: PlayStation 4 **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Koei Tecmo **Developer:** Team Ninja **Release:** 2016

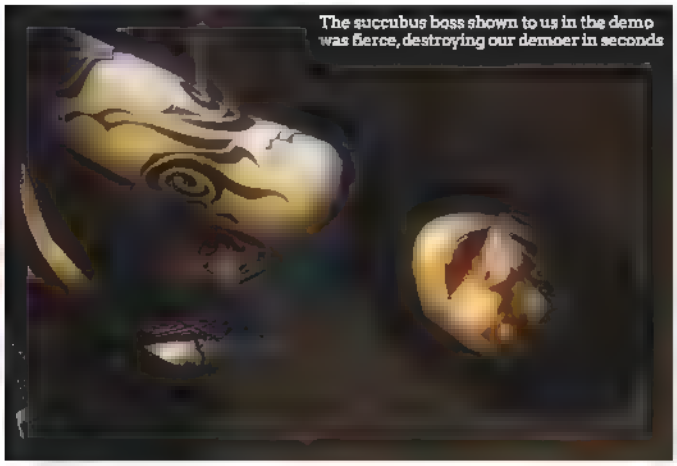
Koei Tecmo grabbed everyone's attention a few months ago when the publisher released an alpha of Nioh, a game originally announced in 2004 and based on an unfinished script by legendary director Akira Kurosawa. A historical-fantasy action game, Nioh has traveled a long road and undergone many different iterations during its development before settling on this one, a Dark Souls-inspired slasher developed by Team Ninja.

Despite clear inspirations, Nioh isn't a Souls rip-off. The E3 demo we saw expanded beyond the foundations of the alpha and showcased new equipment and weapons that hero Ken-Sama can use to his advantage. Chief among these are rifles he can use to take out enemies in the distance, like pesky archers stationed on cliff sides. Ken-Sama also has stances he can use with his melee weapons that change the speed and severity of his attack but can also affect just how much you're leaving open to enemy attacks.

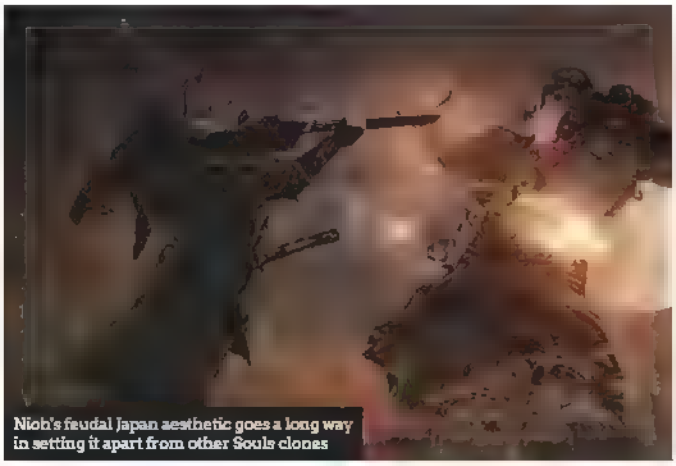
Combat is fast and enjoyable, hinging on just how adept you are at learning enemy patterns and flanking them.

The art design also helps set Nioh apart from its influences. Yes, Ken-Sama fights demons and other monstrous beasties, but he also takes on bandits, their heads disappearing in a glorious shower of red when he delivers the killing blow. However, bosses are definitely more in the realm of the fantastical. In the demo, I watched as the demoer went up against a flying succubus in a cave who was capable of ripping open her own face in a gruesome explosion and sucking Ken-Sama's blood with spiky tendrils that sprang forth from the meaty abyss.

Nioh, with its fast-paced action and feudal Japan setting, might end up being the first game of its ilk to crawl out from beneath the shadow of Dark Souls and stand on its own legs. **» *Javy Gwaltney***



The succubus boss shown to us in the demo was fierce, destroying our demoer in seconds



Nioh's feudal Japan aesthetic goes a long way in setting it apart from other Souls clones

MADDEN NFL 17

33

Hands-on time with the game bears out its changes

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** EA Sports **Developer:** EA Tiburon **Release:** August 23

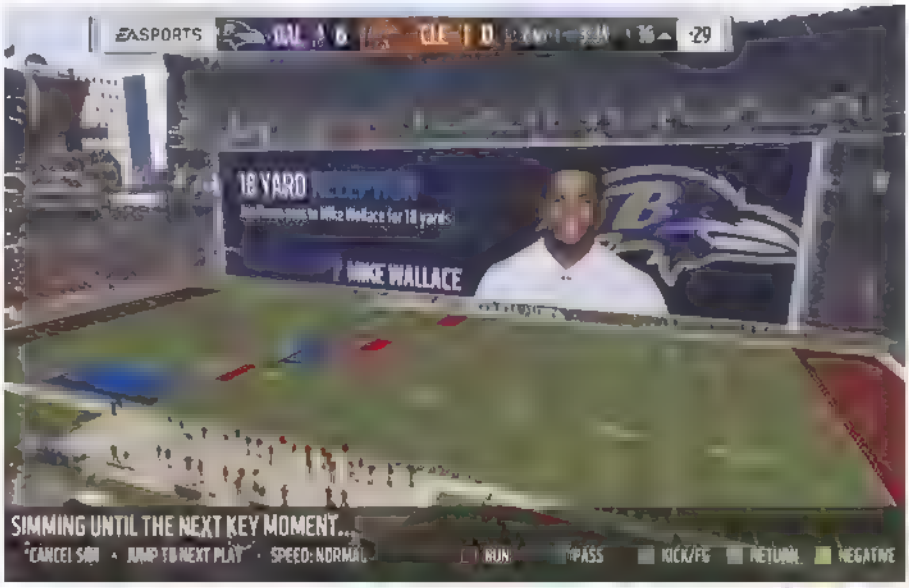
They often say that it's hard to analyze a single player's performance on any given play. As an outside observer you have to know what play was called and what that player's responsibility was during that play and at that particular moment. While nothing happens in a vacuum, I played a decent amount of time with the new Madden at E3, and was impressed with a lot of the individual performances I saw. Whether it's a block here or a better linebacker zone coverage there, I am heartened by the way the game is executing on the developer's stated changes for this year.

The subtle byproduct of the title's gameplay changes is that Madden 17 doesn't necessarily feel harder in any particular way, it just means that I must be more vigilant executing the concepts I've already been employing from previous games. For instance, as a quarterback, the improved linebacker drops mean that the throwing windows are tighter. I not only have to make sure I understand the routes of my receivers, but also know that what I see pre-snap isn't always going to be indicative of the play as it develops. Similarly, the scaling down of last year's aggressive catch means I must be more discerning when throwing against one-on-one situations.

The running game for both sides of the ball is a more interesting chess match than before. Interior and outside running lanes appear more defined; you notice the linemen holding their blocks properly. Runs to the edge test the mettle of both the offensive and defensive lines; someone has to seal that edge properly while the right defender has to crash that point and his teammates have to flood their gaps. It's not like you won't see missed blocks, spectacular catches, or lead-footed linebackers. I did. But on the whole the game feels more alive – like an offense that finally has access to its full playbook after running a truncated version all pre-season.

Despite the increased granularity of some of this year's gameplay changes, Madden 17 continues trying to make the game more accessible. The new linebacker zones and player responsibilities show up in the pre-snap play art as well as skills trainer drills, and the Play the Moment is a time-saving option that skips to the important moments in a game. Similar to the suggested play feature from a couple of years ago, I'll probably use it from time to time. A big part of Play the Moment's attractiveness is a large play-by-play graphic that is the game's super sim engine writ large (shown below). I was initially ambivalent about Play the Moment, and while I'm not awestruck by it, I hope that this year's modest tweaks to the career mode – from more draft day gems/busts to more impactful injuries – similarly strike a chord once I get more time with them.

Madden 17 isn't a game of grand changes, but you don't always have to go with a new quarterback to win the game. **» Matthew Kato**



The aggressive catch isn't as powerful as it was last year

FORZA HORIZON 3

34

Tearing through the Outback

Platform: Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Racing (4-Player Online) **Publisher:** Microsoft Studios **Developer:** Playground Games **Release:** September 27

Forza Horizon 3 isn't the first iteration of the series on Xbox One, but it might as well be. The last title made some necessary moves to improve the franchise's off-road and free-wheeling formula with more open environments and fun diversions like Bucket List challenges, but Forza Horizon 3 has ambitions that outstrip its predecessor. Forza Horizon 2 was at odds with itself at times in trying to open up its world for racers to explore at the expense of the festival's structure. Horizon 3 attempts to bring the two seemingly disparate elements together by putting you in charge of the festival in the continent of Australia.

Since you're heading up the festival now, you get to choose the events in it as well as build new Festival sites. Developer Playground Games hasn't gone into too much detail on exactly how you build the sites and how much customization is involved, so it's unknown how granular things will get. I hope it's a structure that somehow incorporates some of the aspects of the series that encourage exploration, like the photo activity and the outposts from the first game. You do decide where the festival sites go, so there is a degree of choice and use of the map. Furthermore, users can import their own music via the cloud-based OneDrive into the game.

The creation of events dovetails nicely with the game's online focus, which enables you to create challenges you can share with your friends, though it can be played offline as well. You set a wide range of variables (time of day, types of car, entry requirements, etc.), name the event, complete it to set the difficulty, and the game broadcasts it to your friends with its own automatically generated poster.

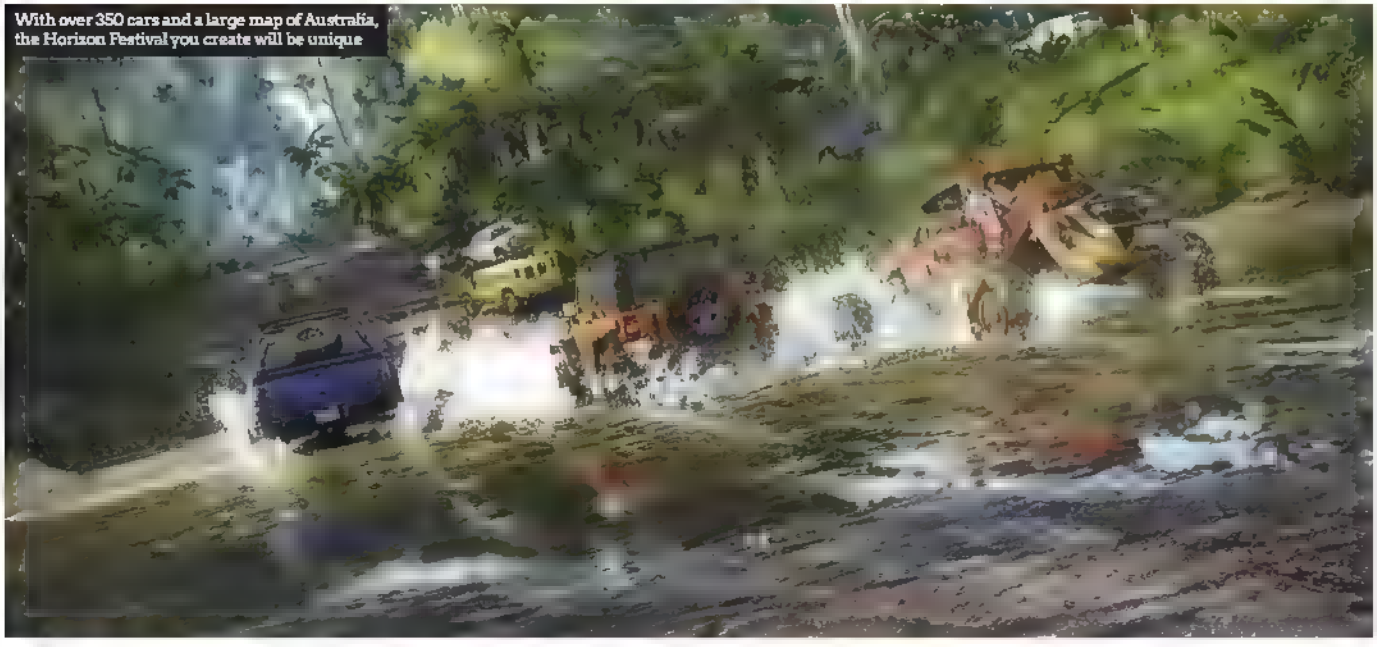
Horizon 3's Australian location – complete with beautiful beaches, lush jungles, and cities – is ripe for the creation of all kinds of challenges (including Bucket List ones). The series' largest car list yet (more than 350) should give you a ride for every occasion. It even includes the strange Australian phenomenon of the ute.

Horizon is all about racing different makes (although I don't know why you'd want to take a Lamborghini into the jungle), and you'll likely be doing more of this thanks to the game's four-player drop in/drop out co-op. This includes a full co-op campaign mode, the ability for everyone to take on any user-created challenges, and the transfer of your progress back into single-player.

The presence of your friends extends to a new utilization of drivatars (A.I. versions of your friends that are a staple of the Forza brand) called a drivatar lineup. This is a crew of you and three of your virtual friends who share the rewards of everyone's performance. Finally, the online amenities continue with the return of the auction house and user storefront for highlighting some of the great decal work.

It's one thing to open up your map in the name of freedom, but Forza Horizon 3 does more than just offer an environment that is twice the size of the previous games. It gives players the tools to create the kind of experience they want as well as the ability to bring their friends into the fun in numerous ways. This is what the Horizon Festival is all about.

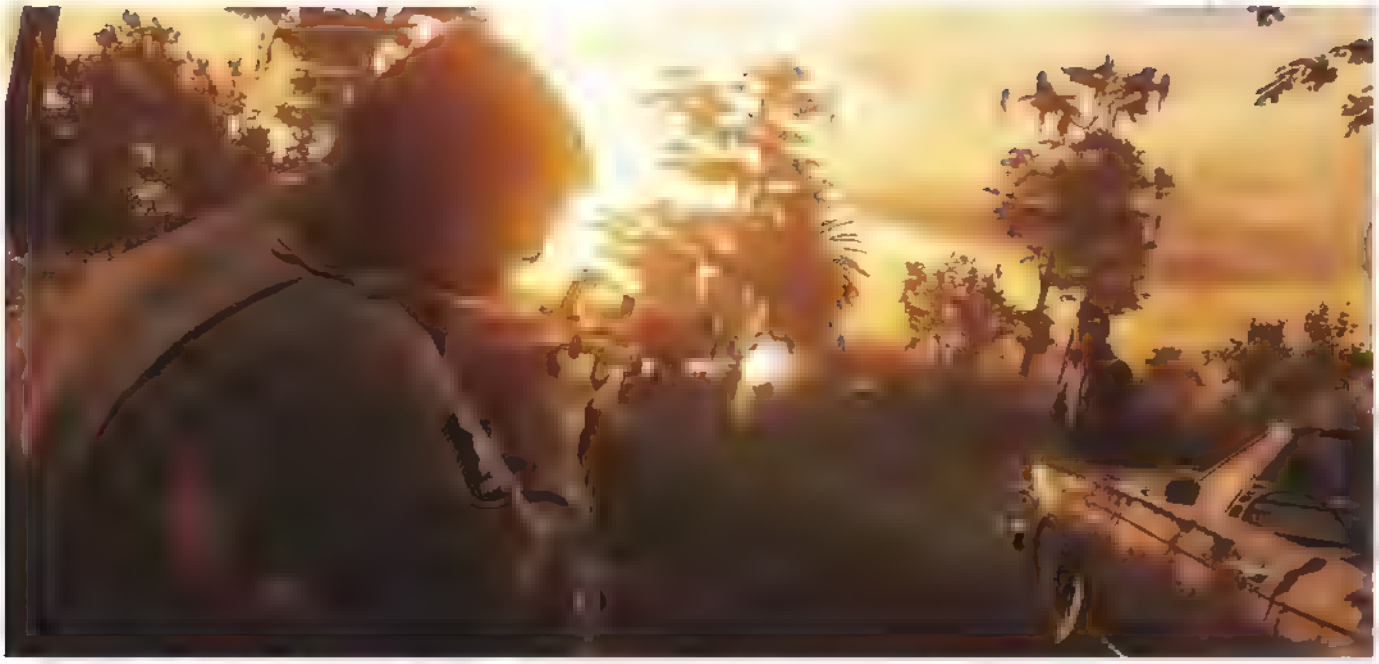
»» Matthew Kato



With over 350 cars and a large map of Australia, the Horizon Festival you create will be unique

MAFIA III

Blood on the bayou



Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** 2K Games **Developer:** Hangar 13 **Release:** October 7

Lincoln Clay has returned from the Vietnam War, but the biggest battle of his life is just beginning. After being betrayed by the Italian mob, shot, and left for dead, this war hero bounces back from the grave with a vengeance. Lincoln has a hunger for blood that can only be satiated by burning the mafia's criminal empire to the ground.

Mafia III's story is told via a documentary-style narrative, and during our E3 demo we caught glimpses of these interviews as Lincoln carried out his crusade against the Marcano crime family. Lincoln's target during our demo is a fat cowpoke named Uncle Lou, a rich smack dealer who uses the French Ward as his base of operations.

Lincoln's primary goal when taking down any criminal mastermind is to destabilize their operation until the crime lord comes out of hiding. This overarching goal can play out through a variety of open-world missions. We watched a brief montage of Lincoln interrogating Lou's pimps for information, burning down his drug boats, robbing one of his orgies, killing his smack dealers, and capturing his brothel and drug den. Players won't have to complete all of these tasks to get to Lou, but each one hurts the mobster where it counts: the bank account. Once Lou's operation has been sufficiently destabilized, the fat man decides to host a fundraiser on a riverboat down by the bayou. Unfortunately for Lou, this is the opportunity Lincoln has been waiting for.

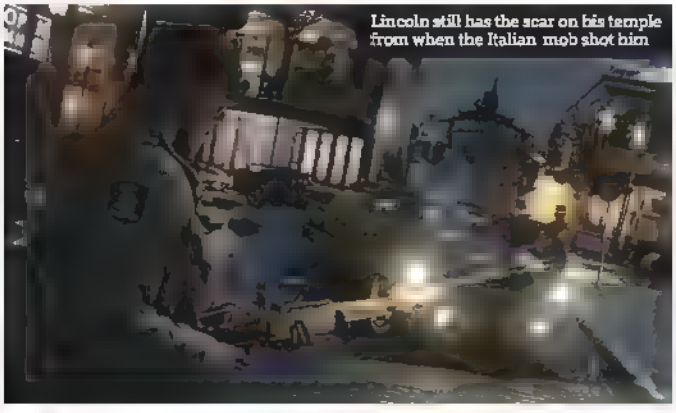
After cutting Lou's fundraiser short by sending the riverboat crashing into a pier, Lincoln swims through alligator-infested waters to get to his target. We see a few hapless bystanders sink under the waves as the gators enjoy a late dinner. Once aboard, Lincoln finds Lou holding court in the boat's main dining area. Lincoln uses this opportunity to sneak up behind several goons and take them out with his hunting knife. These stealth moments give Lincoln a chance to thin the herd, because once the shooting starts there's no turning back.

The rest of the riverboat sequence plays out like a traditional third-person cover shooter as Lincoln chases Lou through the ship and dispenses with his goons using everything from shotguns to molotovs. A few of Lincoln's shots go wild as the ship rocks violently, continually crashing against the shore.

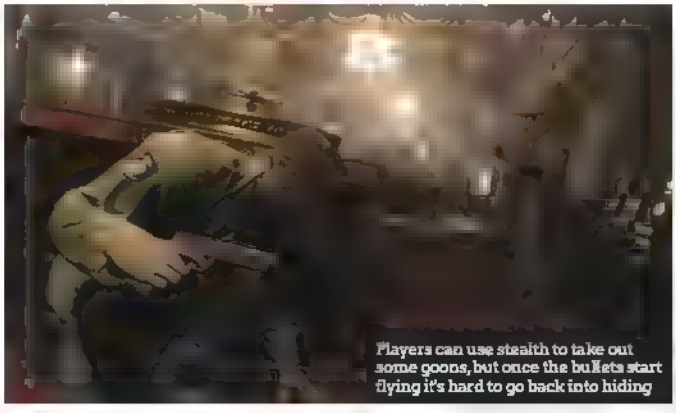
After reaching the ship's bow, Lincoln confronts his prey. Seconds later, an explosion sends them both over the side of the boat. During the tumble, Lincoln loses his gun, so he's forced to stalk Lou through the swamps as the gangster fires wildly into the darkness. After a brief sequence where Lincoln stalks the mobster through the bog, he sneaks up behind Lou and sticks his knife into the mobster's neck. Lincoln can check one more name off his list.

This job is done, but as long as the head of the Marcano crime family is still drawing breath, Lincoln will have trouble finding rest.

» Ben Reeves



Lincoln still has the scar on his temple from when the Italian mob shot him



Players can use stealth to take out some goons, but once the bullets start flying it's hard to go back into hiding

FIFA 17

Putting you in the shoes of a pro player

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online) **Publisher:** EA Sports **Developer:** EA Canada **Release:** September 27

Sports are filled with drama on and off the field, whether it's a tale of how a player overcame adversity to become the superstar they are, the ruthless business of players moving between teams, or the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Video games have occasionally tried to capture this inherent element of the sports we love, from Fight Night Champions to NBA 2K16. Now, the FIFA franchise is crafting its own story alongside its normal suite of modes with help from some of the mightiest developers in the Electronic Arts stable.

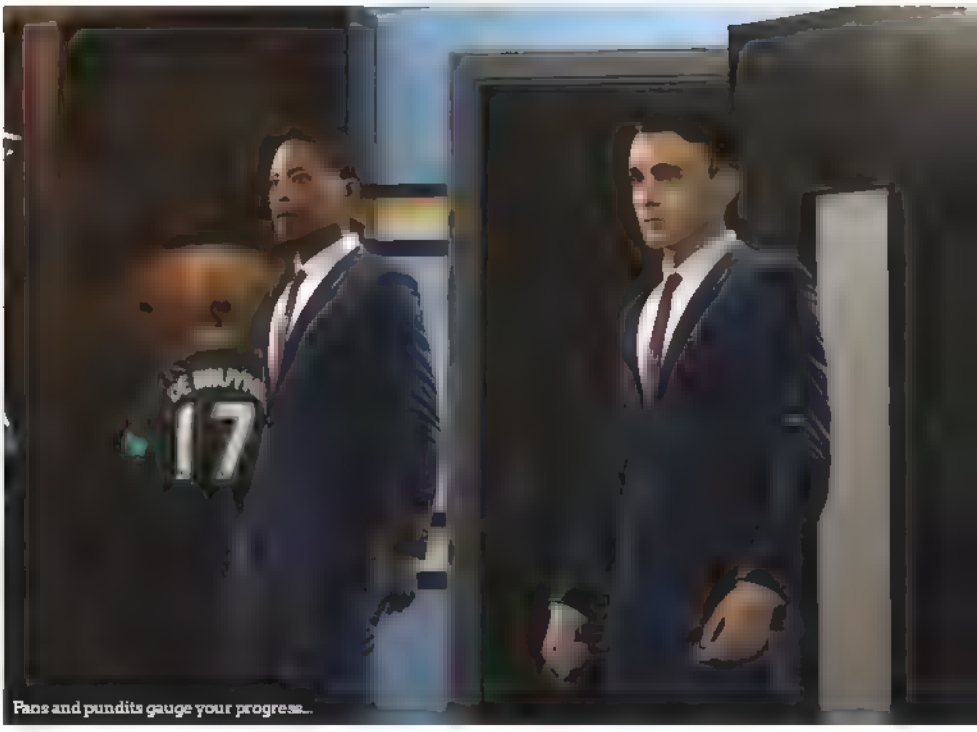
FIFA 17 uses DICE's acclaimed Frostbite engine (Battlefield) to power a new story mode entitled The Journey. Developer EA Canada says the mode wouldn't be possible without Frostbite because it allows it to create interiors like offices, locker rooms, airplanes, and houses, as well as capture the faces of some of football's big stars such as Eden Hazard, Wayne Rooney, and James Rodriguez. The mode's conversation system was created with assistance from BioWare, who have had success in this department with its Mass Effect and Dragon Age series.

The Journey puts you in the shoes of a young player named Alex Hunter, who is about to sign his first Premier League contract. You can pick which team Hunter signs for, but the experience overall isn't strictly linear. The conversation system shapes your personality, which could affect how the manager, teammates, and fans treat you. The dialogue choices cast Hunter as brash or professional, for example, and users can mold his personality as time goes on.

However, the gameplay is ultimately the biggest determiner of Hunter's fate. Players proceed through matches like they normally would, only with objectives whose completion lets you upgrade Hunter's abilities, and a real-time match rating indicator that gives you feedback. The better you do, the more playing time you'll get along with other success.

That's not to strictly say that your time in the mode feels just like any other mode in the game. We played through Hunter's first match with Manchester United, and the Frostbite engine's prowess was evident in the cutscenes as Hunter went from nervously awaiting the announcement of the gameday roster, talking to his friend on the team via the conversation system, and watching said friend score the match's opening goal while Hunter sat as a sub on the bench. Sure enough, however, with the game deadlocked in a draw, José Mourinho (yes, real Premier League managers are in the game) gives the nod to an assistant coach who tells you to get ready, because you're going in. As you start to warm up along the touchline, a chorus of catcalls rains down on you from the visiting supporters, and it's hard not to feel a little nervous.

Hunter has to face up to his own pressure. Both his father and grandfather were famous footballers, and while his grandfather is still a positive influence in Alex's life, something seems to be up with the father. Alex also has a friend on the team, and it's very clear this is a frenemies



Fans and pundits gauge your progress...

...and going to United looks like a bad career move

situation with its own brand of competition. While we don't know how Hunter's story ends, there should be more twists and turns beyond just how much playing time you get.

I'm excited for The Journey and its possibilities, but some questions stand out. EA Canada will have to balance letting players' actions guide the narrative versus the developer's need to control it so it feels like an actual story and not just a series of games with some cutscenes thrown in. If a user is great in the game, how will the mode inject drama, tension, suspense, and even failure naturally into the story?

The mode centers on the Premier League, so how will it incorporate the rest of the world of football? Creative director Matt Prior tells me that The Journey won't pretend the Premier League exists in a vacuum, and there should be cameos from real-life players from other leagues, but without the ability to transfer outside the Premier League will the mode's world feel real?

Many questions remain for The Journey, but it's not the only thing that FIFA 17 offers. The gameplay itself has received an upgrade courtesy of more physical play. While FIFA 16's jostling system felt a little slippery, this year's game puts the emphasis on the left trigger to tussle with forwards, shield off defenders with your back to the goal, or get positioning for headers. It feels natural and fluid and not like a sequence of animations or like there's a rock, paper, scissors game running behind the scenes.

Further gameplay improvements for FIFA 17 include a reticle for placing corners, more intelligent runs by teammates in the offensive third, and a new low, driven shot performed by hitting the shot button while it's powering up. In my hands-on time, the physical play and satisfaction of hitting a good shot were what stood out most, while the timidity of the defensive assist and occasional trouble detecting the ball persisted from last year.

Sports games have become filled with modes (EA Canada will have more on career mode at another time), as these titles use them to speak to and excite different kinds of gamers. The Journey is the developer's chance to do more than just put another bullet point on the back of the box; it's an opportunity to craft a new experience for fans. ➤ **Matthew Kato**

BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

A spooky spiritual successor

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Deep Silver **Developer:** Inti Creates **Release:** March

You never know what kind of Kickstarter project you're going to get until it releases. Backers have plenty of horror stories about games they chipped in on only to have their dreams crushed or go unfulfilled. Thankfully, Kickstarter has also given us a wealth of creative indie titles that never would have seen the light of day without crowdfunding. Based on our hands-on time at E3, Koji Igarashi's homage to Castlevania: Symphony of the Night looks more like the latter.

Bloodstained follows the exploits of Miriam, an orphan afflicted by an alchemist's curse that is slowly turning her skin to crystal. To stop this curse, Miriam must hunt down a summoner named Gebel who suffers from the same affliction. Unfortunately, this summoner lives in a castle completely overrun with demons and other grotesque creatures of the night.

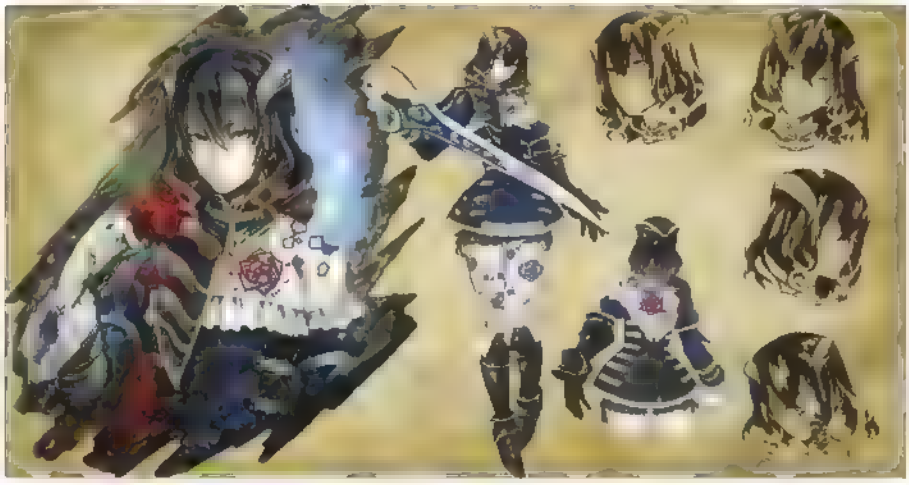
As the name hints, the game follows the classic Symphony of the Night formula that Igarashi helped pioneer. Miriam earns experience from fallen enemies and can upgrade her weapons and armor as she explores a massive interconnected world.

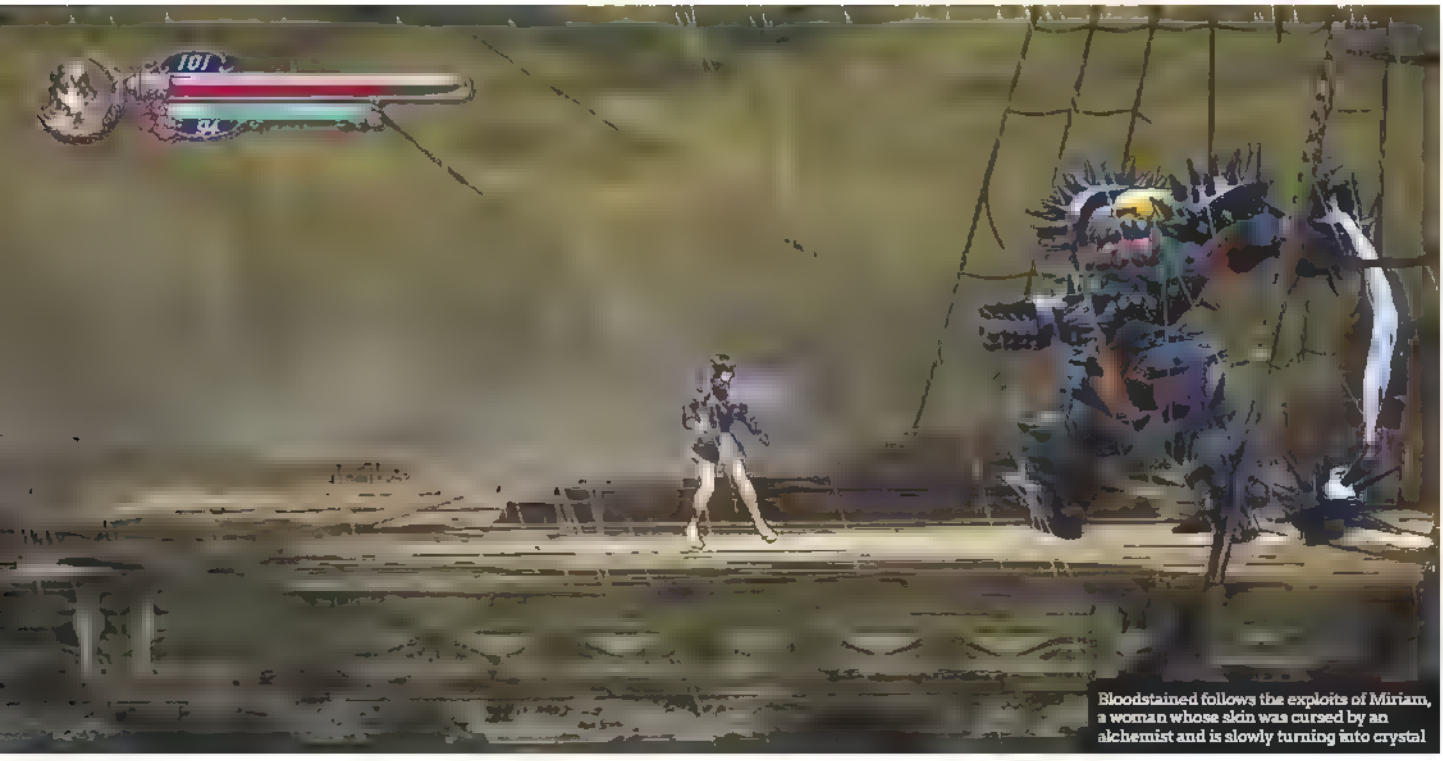
In the demo we played, Miriam boarded a ship called the Galleon Minerva, which is headed for Gebel's castle. This ship functions as the game's opening area, and like the castle, it is filled with ungodly creatures looking to swab the deck with Miriam's blood.

While exploring the Galleon Minerva we encounter shadowy demons that emerged from the ground, tentacled flesh eaters, and armored knights with whip-like maces. In one room, we find a pair of kung-fu shoes that boosts our attack power. In another, we learn a fireball ability, which helps take down enemies as well as ignite cannons that blow holes in nearby walls, opening shortcuts on the map. The level even ends in a massive boss fight against a kraken-like monster that fires massive balls of energy that home in on their target: you.

Bloodstained does little to surprise, adhering closely to the Symphony of the Night formula. Thankfully, that's exactly the kind of game fans of Igarashi's Castlevania titles have been hoping for. The game is still almost a year from release, but with its gorgeous storybook aesthetic and tight controls, we're already feeling like Bloodstained is on the right track.

» Ben Reeves





Bloodstained follows the exploits of Miriam, a woman whose skin was cursed by an alchemist and is slowly turning into crystal

38

BATMAN: ARKHAM VR

The closest you'll ever get to Wayne Manor

Platform: PSVR **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer:** Rocksteady **Release:** October

Rocksteady revitalized Batman as a gaming hero with its Arkham trilogy, which capped off with Arkham Knight. While it may have ended on a note of finality, the studio surprised us all by showing that it's not done with the Caped Crusader. Batman: Arkham VR is a new game that shows off some of the cool things that are possible with PlayStation VR, including a chance to suit up in the Batcave and get a sense of what it's like to be the world's greatest detective.

The E3 demo is split into two main sections. In the first portion, we start in the palatial Wayne Manor. Alfred tells us that while we might want to retire for the evening, Gotham needs us. He hands us a key, which we grab by reaching out with our PlayStation Move controller. It unlocks the piano, and after banging on the keys for a moment, we're taken down to the Batcave. We don't typically sleep in our armor, so we have to put on Batman's armor, piece by piece. We grab the various parts and put them on – including his iconic cowl – and then test out a few gadgets. After tossing batarangs at targets and firing the grapple gun, we put them on the utility belt. It's time to get to work.

The second part of the demo is like a more immersive interpretation of the crime-investigation portions from the Arkham games. Nightwing has apparently been murdered in an alley, and Batman needs to figure out what happened and who is responsible. We can't move freely here, but we shift between several points to scan for clues. After cataloging the victim's injuries, we see a virtual playback of a fight, and we use our scanner when the action corresponds to a wound. It's a well-choreographed fight, and we eventually get a clue to a witness. Unfortunately for us, the demo ends before we can dispense our own brand of justice.

This VR experience may not be a new, full-fledged Batman game, but it's a tantalizing look at VR – and also the next best thing to being Bruce Wayne for an evening. It's certainly safer.

» Jeff Cork

39

BATTLE CHASERS: NIGHTWAR

Old-school gameplay, new-school beauty

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher:** Nordic Games **Developer:** Airship Syndicate **Release:** 2017

If you put the art of Darksiders in a blender with the turn-based combat of RPGs like Final Fantasy X you might end up with something like Battle Chasers: Nightwar. After Darksiders developer Vigil Games closed its doors in 2013, several designers from the studio spun off to form Airship Syndicate with the idea of resurrecting Joe Madureira's unfinished-yet-beloved comic series from the late '90s. The result is a project that could appeal to fans of the series and newcomers alike.

While the game features several of the comic's popular heroes, such as Garrison, Gully, and Calibretto, its narrative is a side story that welcomes newcomers. At the beginning of the game, the Battle Chasers crew is searching for an old friend, only to end up crash landing on an island full of undead monsters. As the group explores this dungeon-filled island, they slowly uncover the machinations of an evil vampire lord.

We explored one of Nightwar's dungeons during a hands-on demo at E3, and got to test the combat. Like classic RPGs, these three-person battles are turn based. You can also see the turn order on the bottom of the screen, which helps you strategize your attacks. Basic attacks are quick and help fill up each character's mana bar, while more powerful attacks deplete that mana bar and require a "casting" time, meaning your opponents might get one more hit in before your attack initiates. This combat system seems ripe with strategy as you manage your energy and work to defeat your enemies before their next attack.

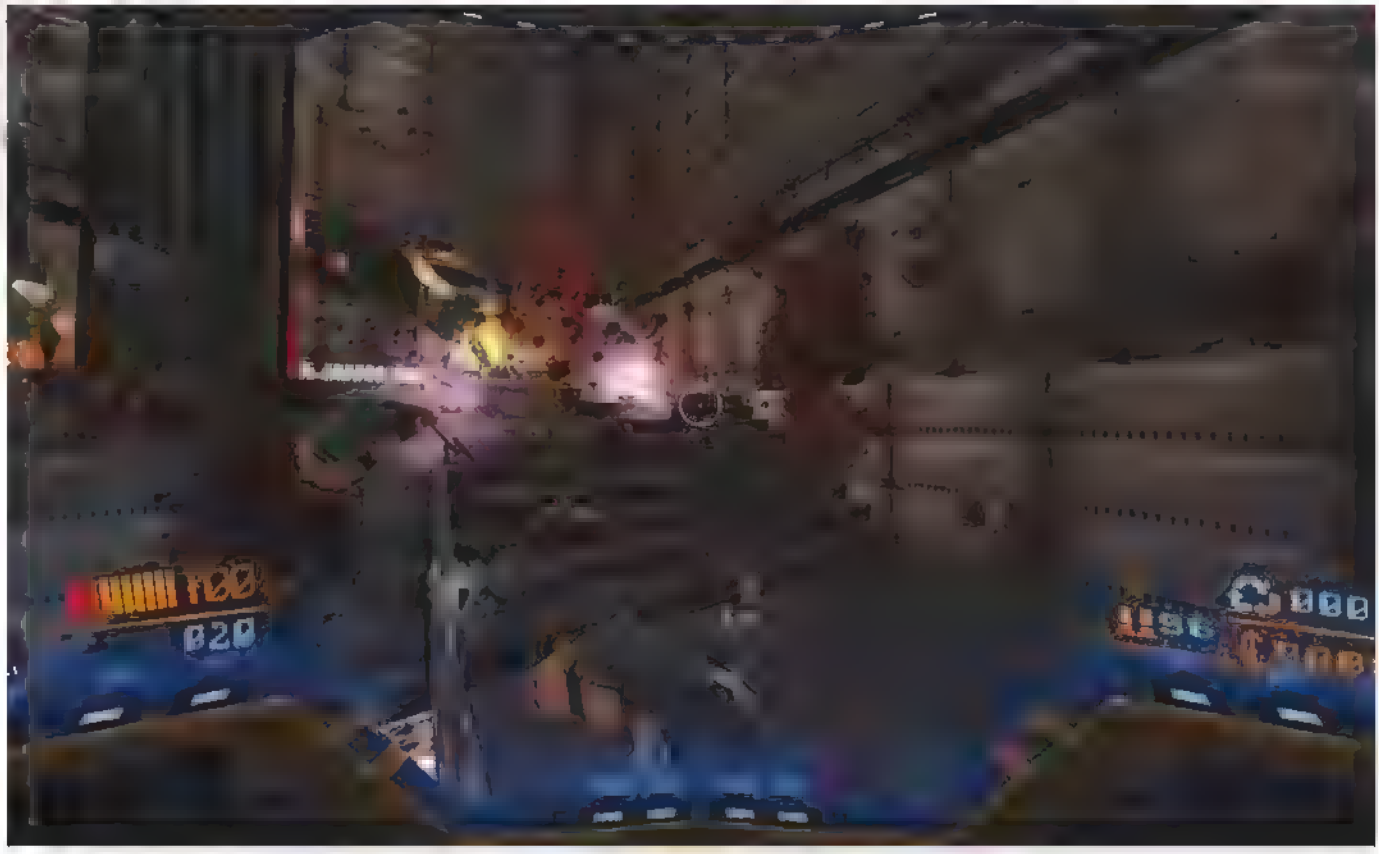
The dungeons are fun to explore. You can see where enemies are located and try to avoid battles altogether, or use Garrison's dash move to glide past traps. At one point in the dungeon, I discovered the journal of a deceased treasure hunter who warned about greedy adventurers. This turned out to be a clue to solving a treasure-chest puzzle around the corner.

Battle Chasers: Nightwar raised more than $800,000 on Kickstarter just last year, but it already looks great. Visually, it's like a comic come to life, and the turn-based combat is full of strategic depth. Airship Syndicate's new adventure might have been one of the most underrated games of E3, but it has a chance to make a big splash when it releases next year.

» Ben Reeves

STRAFE

Looks like the '90s, but plays like today



Platform: PC **Style:** 1-Player Shooter **Publisher:** Devolver Digital **Developer:** Pixel Titans **Release:** 2017

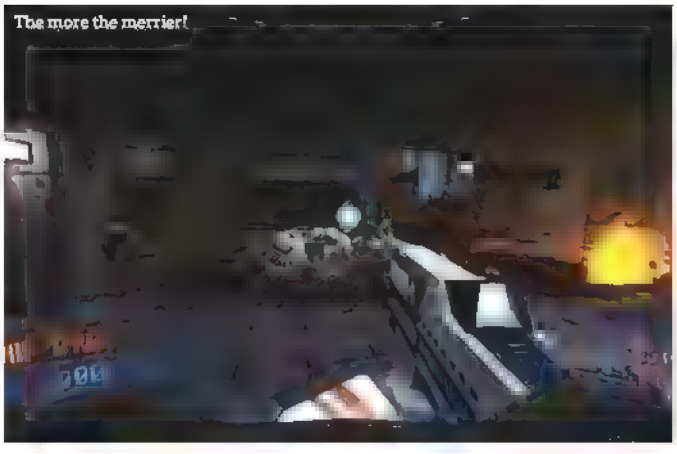
If you quickly looked at an out-of-context Strafe screenshot, you might mistake it for a Quake-era shooter you just happened to miss at the time. The upcoming release's aesthetics are so spot-on that it's nearly indistinguishable from the games it apes.

Strafe is a delightful blend of throwback carnage and more contemporary game mechanics. At the start of each game, players choose one of three weapons: shotgun, machine gun, or rail gun. This is your primary gun throughout the session, but you can upgrade it along the way with the scrap you collect.

Monsters occasionally drop limited-use weapons. You can pocket one, but should you pick up another, whatever you are keeping in reserve is lost. The lack of a weapon wheel encourages players to think strategically about when to use a collected gun. Chances are, you're going to want to let loose with it right away.

Strafe is different each time you play, with procedural generation that takes a page from Spelunky's book. Each of the four different zones has a unique aesthetic and three separate areas. These dictate what kinds of environments you must fight through. For instance, one starts you above ground, with caves interspersed. The second area takes you deeper underground. The third brings you back to the surface, but it's raining.

Each zone includes its own rooms, unique enemies, and weapons you can only find in that area. Strafe is a roguelike, but it takes the well-tread genre in a new direction by mixing in the classic, bloody, twitchy gameplay of '90s shooters. In an era that has seen the rebirth of Wolfenstein and Doom, Strafe's timing couldn't be better. **» Michael Futter**



The more the merrier!

Leave a trail of blood behind you to mark your path

TYRANNY

Choosing the path of evil

Platform: PC **Style:** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher:** Paradox Interactive **Developer:** Obsidian Entertainment **Release:** 2016

Tyranny is the next iterative development in a history of the classic PC RPG, which ranges from Baldur's Gate II to Pillars of Eternity. While many of the modern-day enhancements are present and the genre is much easier to wade into, Tyranny clearly caters to those that have always loved those isometric real-time-with-pause battles, epic stories, and now perhaps more than ever before, branching storylines where player choice matters.

Tyranny starts in a place few role-playing games do – the bad guys have already won, and you're one of them. You can choose to stay on that path as a harbinger of the evil Overlord Kyros. You are no mere peasant with a tin helmet, bronze sword, and a handful of dreams off the farm. As a ranking enforcer of the armies of evil, you act as judge, jury, and executioner in any matters you may encounter in the realm.

You could let your good side shine and empathize with the last of the struggling rebels, or you can act however you wish from event to event and see where the wind takes you. While Tyranny likely isn't as long from start to finish as Pillars of Eternity, the paths you take can be widely different, making it one of those rare full-form role-playing games that has a significant replayability factor.

Combat is somewhat complex for neophytes to the genre, locking in abilities and watching them play out in real-time-with-pause combat. While your crew is intelligent and makes moves on their own if you don't want to issue them any commands, it's in your best interests to plot them to victory. Tyranny also includes interesting team maneuvers that can be used once per encounter, such as your tank smacking down an enemy with a shield, leaving them vulnerable to a massive bleed attack from your rogue. These character-based skills can be acquired by working up your relationships between your companions.

Characters use their attributes outside of combat as well, whether you're scaling a wall or intimidating enemy forces to run away through athletics, mind, charm, and more. Depending on how you build your characters and the choices you are constantly making, things play out much differently from playthrough to playthrough. Some encounters and areas are specifically hidden behind choices.

Pillars of Eternity helped put the old-school PC RPG back in the spotlight, and Tyranny looks like it has every chance of keeping it there. **» *Daniel Tack***

Working up your relationships with companions unlocks new abilities

Powerful magic, massive melee, and stealthy tactics are all available

42 POKÉMON SUN & MOON

Small, but noticeable steps

Platform: 3DS **Style:** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher:** The Pokémon Company
Developer: Game Freak **Release:** November 18

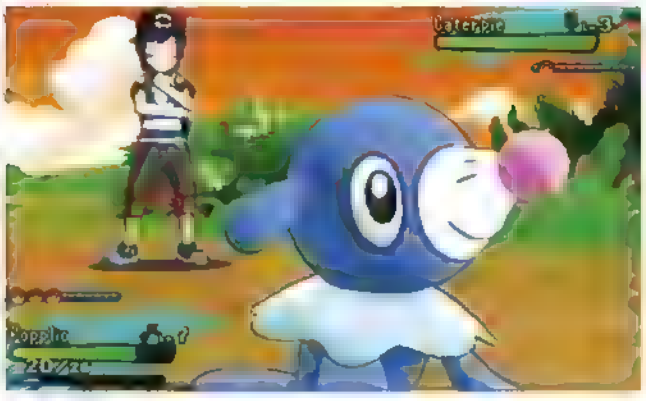
Right before Nintendo shifted its E3 focus solely on Zelda, it took some time during its Treehouse live stream to outline what's new for the next entry in the Pokémon series. We also got a glimpse of some of the new pocket monsters available for collection.

Some of the biggest changes to the game relate to the trainer avatar players control. The character models and animations are updated significantly for more realistic proportions, and their clothes are more customizable. The trainer also appears in battle for the first time. Both you and your opponent are visible from behind your Pokémon combatant cheering on the fight and offering commands. It's the closest the Pokémon video games have ever gotten to representing what a hypothetical Pokémon battle really looks like.

Outside of the previously showcased starter monsters Rowlet, Litten, and Popplio, new Pokémon creatures revealed include Yungoos, Pikipek, and Grubbin. Yungoos is a normal-type Pokémon based on a mongoose with a big, somewhat intimidating toothy smile. Pikipek is based on a woodpecker and is a normal and flying-type. Grubbin is a new bug-type who looks a bit like a larva with large pincers.

Sun & Moon appears to be focused toward accessibility. Game Freak overhauled the Pokédex dramatically to have more personality and offer better insight into your progress on catching all of the Pokémon. It's now clearer which Pokémon have evolutions at a glance, and it keeps track of which attacks work best against fought Pokémon and offers additional hints for players that get stuck or lose direction.

Pokémon tends to move forward in small-but-affecting steps. Sun & Moon is no exception, but the changes, both in art direction and information distribution, are smart which make us excited to start the collection again later this year. **» *Kyle Hilliard***



43 I AM SETSUNA

An homage to the golden era of JRPGs

Platform: PlayStation 4, PC **Style:** 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher:** Square Enix
Developer: Tokyo RPG Factory **Release:** July 19

Tokyo RPG Factory is a development studio created primarily with the goal of resurrecting the old-school JRPG genre. The team hopes to accomplish just this with its first title, I Am Setsuna. Outside of being nostalgic, I Am Setsuna offers a unique tale of its own that is both tragic and intriguing. From the short hands-on demo I played, I was captured immediately by its snow-blanketed world and fascinating cast of characters.

The world of I Am Setsuna is isolating and cold, from its wintry atmosphere to the zoomed-out isometric perspective. Director Atsushi Hashimoto stated in interviews that he hopes it's remembered as the "RPG of snow." Aesthetically, the game is gorgeous, with a pastel-like look and faded color palette.

During the brief tutorial introduction, I begin playing as Endir, a mercenary who fights off monsters. I traverse a forest in an attempt to save a young woman from a beast. I notice the subdued, haunting music, which gives a melancholic vibe as I edge closer to beginning a fight.

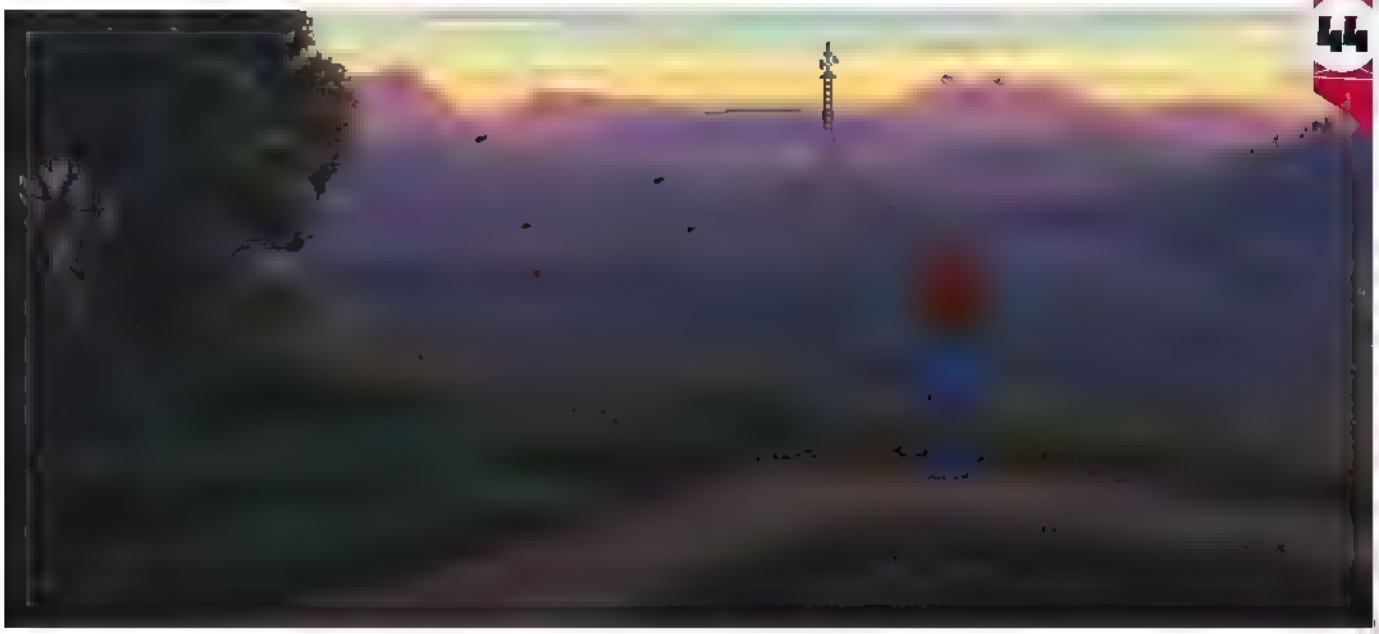
The soundtrack, composed by Tomoki Miyoshi of Soulcalibur V, features almost exclusively the piano performance of Randy Kerber, a studio keyboardist whose work can also be heard in *Titanic* and *Forrest Gump*.

When encountering the beast, the pace picks up. Similar to the likes of older Final Fantasy games and Chrono Trigger, I Am Setsuna is turn-based and employs the active-time battle system. This means my ATB gauge must be filled before I can unleash attacks, and a second SP meter triggers the Momentum System, raising the effectiveness of subsequent attacks.

Once I save the woman, I'm reacquainted with an older man I met earlier on. He tells me I must go on a journey to track down Setsuna, a girl that is about to turn 18, and kill her. Setsuna is meant as a sacrifice for her village, to appease the monsters that would otherwise invade if she was not offered.

Arriving in Setsuna's village, however, things take an unexpected turn: A beast that looks like an overgrown bird is threatening the townsfolk, and an unlikely alliance forms between Setsuna, her friend Aeterna, and Endir. Each party member has their own special abilities, such as Endir's tech attacks that target more than one enemy.

I Am Setsuna is grounded in its old-school style RPG roots, but even outside that setup, it offers a gorgeous world, captivating piano scores, and a foreboding story, leaving me eager to see more. I Am Setsuna has already released in Japan, and its North American release hits this summer. **» *Elise Favis***



THIMBLEWEED PARK

A sinister throwback adventure that channels Twin Peaks

Platform: Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android **Style:** 1-Player Adventure **Publisher:** Terrible Toybox **Developer:** Terrible Toybox **Release:** January

Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick, the two masterminds behind 1987's Maniac Mansion, have partnered up once again. Taking inspiration from early LucasArts adventure games from the '90s, Thimbleweed Park is filled with clever humor and quirky oddities. This pixelated adventure game is a nostalgia-laden homage to a bygone era.

From what I played, the story is more of a backdrop for jokes, similar to the setup of Day of the Tentacle. Thimbleweed Park is a strange town, with even stranger inhabitants, giving it a *Twin Peaks* vibe. I begin playing as two FBI agents, Ray and Reyes, who investigate a corpse under a bridge. I can switch between the two whenever I like. The puzzles start off simple: I have to take a photo of the body to progress, and to do so, some items need to be switched around between the two agents. Once this is completed, I take control of Reyes and head to town to shake down some locals about the mysterious murder.

Entering a neon-signed diner, I interrogate the waitress Sandy for clues. She tells me a story about a clown who lives in an abandoned circus, hinting that he may be the killer I'm searching for. This initiates a flashback. As the story progresses, players switch between five different characters, many of whom are introduced through origin stories such as this.

Thimbleweed Park doesn't take itself seriously, and that only adds to its charm. "Hours of hilarious and riveting gameplay later.. " pops up briefly on the screen – a clever metafictional jab at itself.

I now control the foul-mouthed, crudely natured Ransome the Clown as he prepares to go on stage. He's needlessly obsessive about his appearance, and I'm tasked with finding his belongings, such as his hair gel and red nose. Silly, slapstick comedy ensues when he tries to comb down his hair using the gel. It bounces right back up in the same position, looking no different than it did before.

The puzzles from the demo are logical rather than obtuse, unlike most other titles from the genre, but they also come across as simple. These are the opening moments to the game, however, and I wouldn't be surprised if the difficulty amps up as the story unfolds.

Once Ransome the Clown is up on stage, his jokes, which are chosen with your direction, are cheap and lewd, which in and of itself is entertaining. However, his actions don't come without consequence: A gypsy later puts a curse on him. His pasty face paint and rubber nose become one with his flesh, and a cringe-worthy, darkly humorous animation of this poor clown shows him rubbing and clawing at his face incessantly to no avail.

Thimbleweed Park is sinister and comedic, and the *Twin Peaks* vibe suits it well. If puzzles solutions continue to be presented in a logical manner that doesn't dumb down the difficulty, it could turn out to be the adventure game Maniac Mansion fans, including myself, have been waiting for. ▸▸ ***Elise Favis***

TEKKEN 7

The Mishima blood saga creeps toward its conclusion

Platform: PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Developer:** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Release:** Early 2017

After a long stint exclusively in Japanese arcades, Tekken 7 is readying for release on home consoles across the globe. With new mechanics, gorgeous graphics, and a colorful new cast, the King of the Iron Fist Tournament is looking stronger than ever.

Tekken 7 carries forward the same solid fight mechanics of its predecessor, as well as the Rage mechanic introduced in Tekken 6. However, the team has added a couple of additional branches to the Rage mechanic to deliver new levels of depth and strategy.

"[The Rage system] allowed you to have increased attack power for the rest of the round once your health was below a certain amount," says series producer Katsuhiro Harada. "This time we've added several different mechanics that make use of that. You get rid of your Rage, but on the other hand you can do a Rage Art, which is a combination of attacks that you can pull off if you're in a pinch to actually turn the match around, but it's really more used for offense. Rage Drive is something similar where you lose the Rage status, but you have access to more powerful techniques that you can put into your combos to keep on the offense and perhaps finish your opponent off."

The latest installment is being billed as the final chapter in the Mishima saga. This indicates that some finality will come to the long-running feud between Heihachi, Jin, Kazuya, and others, which is further hinted at by another character's inclusion: Akuma.

Akuma, one of the most legendary and powerful characters from the Street Fighter series, makes his series debut in Tekken 7. Beyond being an interesting crossover character, Akuma fits into the apocalyptic theme of the narrative. According to Bandai Namco, Heihachi's wife Kazumi made a deal with Akuma that if anything should happen to her, he must kill Heihachi and Kazuya.

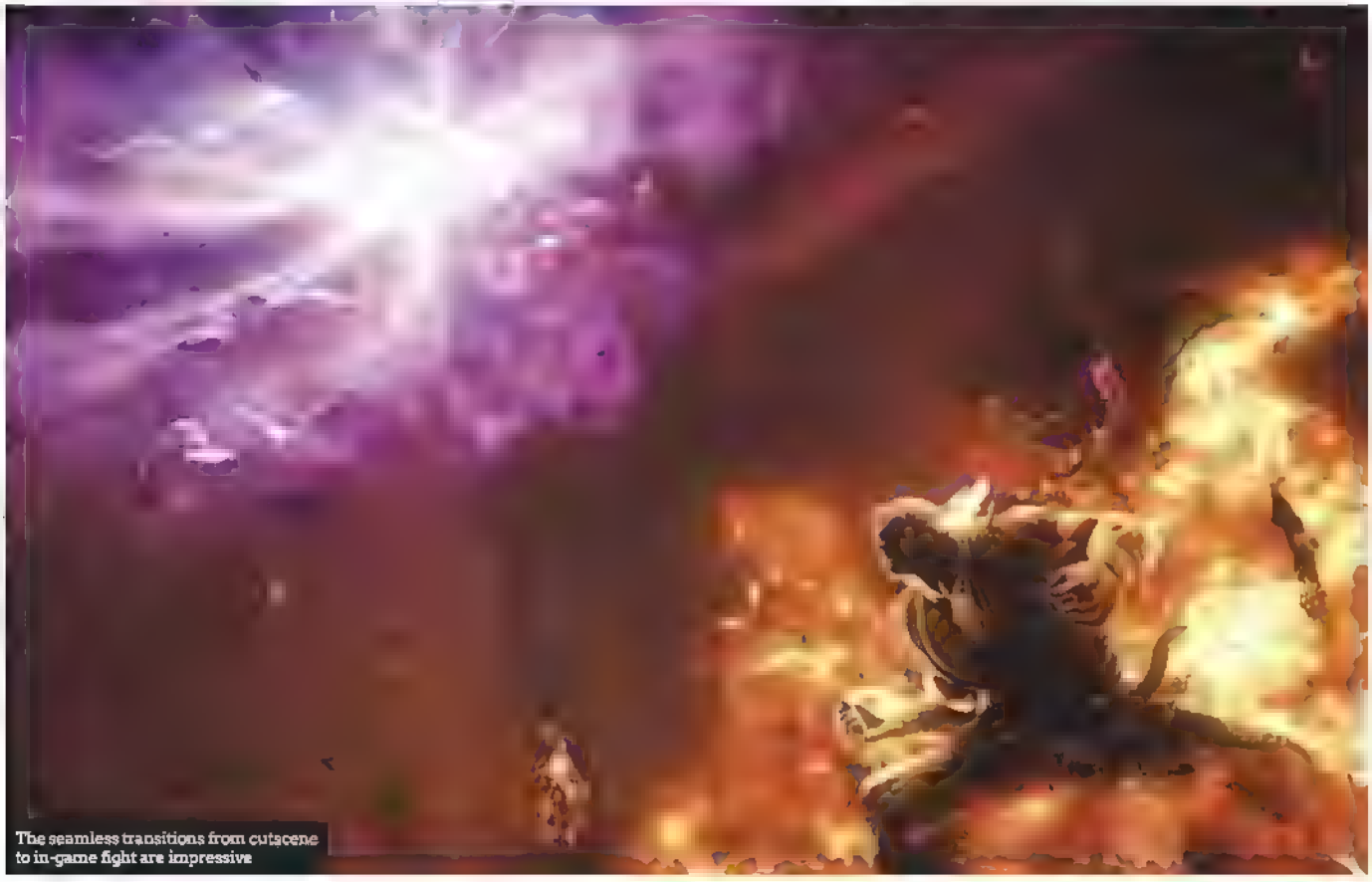
I watch as the result of that deal plays out in a story mode cutscene. Akuma kicks in the door to a temple where Heihachi is meditating, telling the Tekken mainstay that he's come to uphold his promise to Kazumi. The mere mention of Kazumi brings Heihachi out of his meditative state, ready to fight. The two iconic combatants trade blows for about 30 seconds before Akuma hurls a fireball Heihachi's way. A button prompt appears to dodge the fireball and the game seamlessly transitions into a fight between the two.

Tekken 7 is the first game in the series powered by Unreal Engine 4, which allows the developers to noticeably upgrade the graphics and seamlessly transition from CG to fights. For my bout I choose to play as Akuma, who has the same commands and attacks in Tekken 7 as he does in Street Fighter. Within moments, I'm throwing fireballs, dragon punches, and hurricane kicks at Heihachi, who can't withstand the onslaught.

Following the fight, the game jumps right back into a cutscene without a loading screen. The two fighters fly at each other, each hoping to land the final blow. The game cuts away just as the attacks are about to land, leaving me to wonder who won the climactic showdown.

In addition to Akuma, several new fighters are debuting in Tekken 7. From Josie, a new fighter from the Philippines, to Shaheen, one of the first playable Middle Eastern characters to appear in the series, the latest additions are diverse, colorful, and possess traits that reflect their cultures. The most unique addition is Lucky Chloe, who sports cat paws and headphones and dances her way through fights. A strong stable of past Tekken fighters rounds out the roster.

Tekken 7 is still several months away from release, but what I saw and played was impressive. The visuals are crisp, the gameplay is tight, and the new characters are exciting. I'm looking forward to getting my hands on the final product and learning how the legendary Mishima saga comes to a close. ▸▸ **Brian Shea**



The seamless transitions from cutscene to in-game fight are impressive

THE ELDER SCROLLS: LEGENDS

46

New directions for the franchise

Platform: PC, iOS **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Strategy (2-Player Online) **Publisher:** Bethesda Softworks **Developer:** Dire Wolf Digital **Release:** 2016

With today's digital card game environment being overwhelmed with titles, it's a good thing Bethesda and Dire Wolf Digital are coming into the game with a highly recognizable IP and some tweaks on popular formulas. The Elder Scrolls: Legends doesn't reinvent the wheel for the digital collectible card game, but it's looking to land on solid footing in a highly competitive market.

The Elder Scrolls: Legends separates itself from the rest of the pack in two critical ways. First, the game board is divided into two lanes. Each lane can only interact with cards in the same lane, so it presents two different venues for battle and buildup. Each lane has different qualities, with one lane "plain" and the other "cloaked." Cards that enter the cloaked lane can't be attacked during their first turn in play, so it may be a good location to prepare a combo or place more fragile units.

The other major mechanic is the concept of acquiring additional cards for each five points of damage you take, so you'll get one at 25, 20, 15, etc. These help you come back if you're being pummeled by giving you an additional card. Some cards do special things or play for free when they are triggered in this fashion. This leads to more strategy decisions than may be apparent on the surface, as it behooves you to wait until you can finish your opponent in one fell swoop instead of consistently pushing out damage to provide fewer opportunities for the additional resources to matter.

The Elder Scrolls: Legends is free-to-play and offers a campaign to help players ease into the mechanics and various playstyles. Players can acquire currency to buy packs and additional cards by playing matches. While the digital card game market is teeming with competition right now, Bethesda's mix of simplicity, polish, and a beloved IP may be enough to punch into the fray later this year. **» Daniel Tack**

The end goal is to take your opponent to zero health

LAWBREAKERS

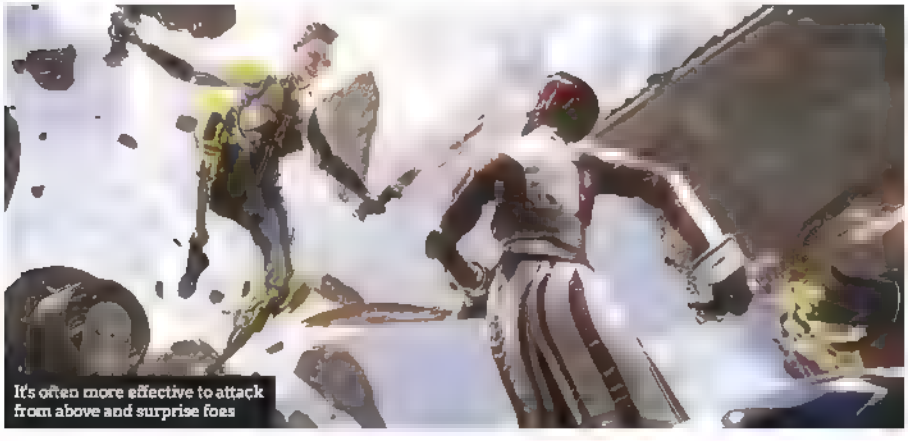
47

Rocket jumping into the past

Platform: PC **Style:** 12-Player Online Shooter **Publisher:** Nexon **Developer:** Boss Key Productions **Release:** 2016

Founded by Cliff Bleszinski, a designer known for his work on Unreal Tournament and Gears of War, Boss Key Productions is attempting to capture the glory days of arcadey first-person shooters with its first title, LawBreakers. The multiplayer FPS pits two teams of specialized classes against each other in a variety of modes, including team deathmatch and Overcharge, a twist on capture the flag where players fight over massive batteries.

LawBreakers' gameplay is built around skills that different player classes bring to the table. The classes are enjoyable, easy to learn, and different enough that players of all playstyles will likely find something that appeals to them. Titans and Vanguards are slow but hit hard, each equipped with abilities that help them dominate a single space. The speedy Assassin class is armed with deadly blades and a grappling hook that lets you latch on to enemies (easier said than done) to deliver a devastating attack. Enforcers are your standard-issue soldier, armed with an assault rifle and pistol, but they're good at attacking mid-range and their sprint ability is useful for getting away from Titans who get too close. All characters also have the ability to blindfire their weapons over their shoulder at foes closing in from behind, which proved pretty useful during my time with the demo.



It's often more effective to attack from above and surprise foes

My hands-on time with LawBreakers left me feeling good about the game. The frenzied pace, with players bouncing around the map and firing volleys of rockets at one another, captures the spirit of the games it's paying homage to without making it feel like it's stuck in the past.

The big challenge for Boss Key will be finding an audience in the crowded market of multiplayer first-person shooters. The gameplay is enjoyable enough that there might be enough there to capture a player base and create a thriving, fast-ng community – a necessity for a multiplayer-only game. **» Javy Gwaltney**

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BEGINNING HOUR

Reinventing the series

Platform: PSVR, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** Capcom **Release:** January 24

Resident Evil is a series known first for zombies, and second for its ridiculous cast of characters. Our first glimpse into the world of Resident Evil 7 leaves these staples behind, and instead places heavy emphasis on psychological horror and the fear of being alone.

"We have to accept that the scale [of the series] had gotten out of hand by Resident Evil 6," admits Resident Evil 7's producer Masachika Kawata. "We wanted to go back to more of an intimate, personal space of horror with just one location. We wanted to go back to what makes this series special."

Kawata says Capcom's goal is to make a "really scary horror game," something that Resident Evil has never truly been. Jump scares and grotesque sights are common in this franchise, but the horror that Kawata is describing is much different. Capcom is going for more of a cerebral experience, where the player can't trust their eyes or their surroundings.

Resident Evil 7's director Koshi Nakanishi says one of the key motifs is a mysterious threat. "You're not sure of what the threat is or what the source is," he says. "You can't quite tell what it is. That makes it all the more scary, when you can't tell what it is."

That thought also extends to Resident Evil 7 itself. Seconds after announcing the title at Sony's E3 press conference, Capcom released a teaser demo for the game called Beginning Hour. None of the content from the demo is included in the forthcoming core game.

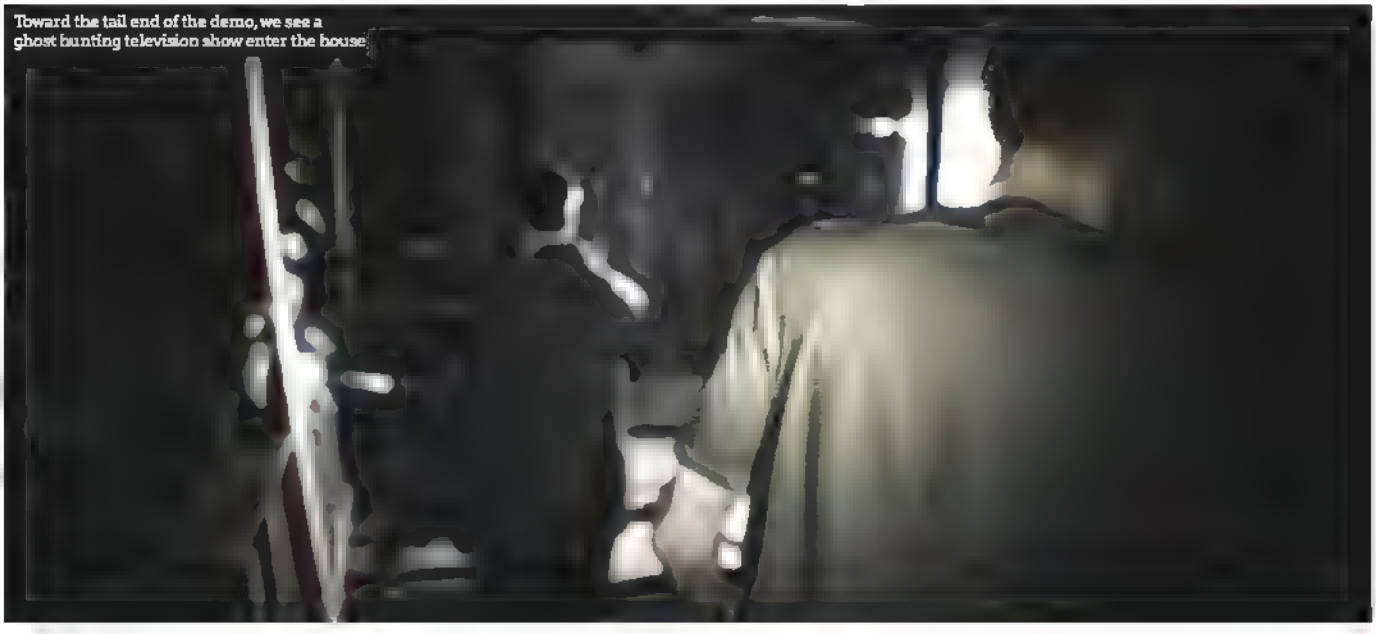
The one takeaway that will be the same is the gameplay. Resident Evil 7 is a first-person experience with heavy focuses on exploration and problem solving. Finding ways to open locked doors, another hallmark of Resident Evil, is present in the demo, and leads to some unsettling discoveries as each new room is accessed. The level of intimacy the player experiences can be heightened through PlayStation VR.

Most environments in the demo offer objects to interact with, such as a microwave that reveals a bird carcass inside, or a piano that welcomes the player to play it, but the lid magically closes before a key can be hit. These moments may sound like cheap gags from a haunted house you visit on Halloween, but they do establish a tone of this world being off kilter and occupied by deranged people or spirits.

That's not to say Resident Evil 7 is a pure first-person narrative experience like Soma and Gone Home. Kawata says the player will have ways to combat the forces that confront them.

The demo has drawn mixed reactions, some praising Capcom's decision to dramatically shake up the series, and others saying it's nothing like Resident Evil anymore. "The reaction from people who watch the demo has been, 'Wow, what is this? This is so new. It's almost hard to believe it's Resident Evil,'" Nakanishi says with a slight smile. "In my mind I see that as a success. Questioning even what it is shows that the mystery I'm trying to get involved in has come across."

We don't have long to wait for answers, as Resident Evil 7 is slated to release on PlayStation VR, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC on January 24 of next year. **»** ***Andrew Reiner***



Toward the tail end of the demo, we see a ghost hunting television show enter the house.

EVER OASIS

49

A new IP channeling Zelda and Animal Crossing

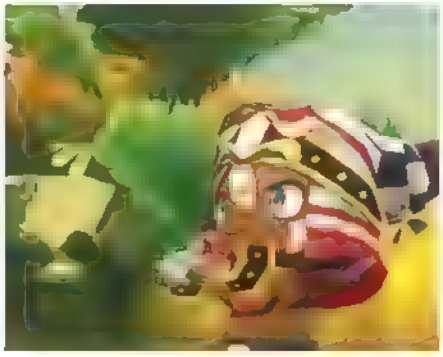
Platform: 3DS **Style:** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Grezzo Co., Ltd. **Release:** 2017

In a day and age when many companies are relying on sequels and big franchises, seeing a new IP is always exciting. Nintendo announced Ever Oasis during its E3 Treehouse livestream, and it was a welcome surprise. The new action/role-playing game looks like an interesting cross between the puzzle-focused dungeons of Zelda, the fun town development of Animal Crossing, and fierce combat of Secret of Mana. That shouldn't be too shocking considering some of the talent behind it. Grezzo, the developer behind Zelda: Majora's Mask 3D and Tri Force Heroes, is at the helm with the help of Koichi Ishii, who worked on Secret of Mana and the first three Final Fantasy games.

Inspired by Egyptian mythology, Ever Oasis takes you to the desert to head up your own oasis. You must build shops from the ground up and make sure they stay stocked. The more shops and variety you have, the more people you will attract to your oasis, helping it grow. While you turn it into a prosperous town, you must also battle through dungeons for new discoveries. Exploring the vast desert and caves also offers opportunities to forage materials to make new products and synthesize equipment for your character and home.

Every person in your three-member party has different abilities to help them overcome obstacles in dungeons. For instance, one member has a special rolling ability to get through small nooks and crannies, while another has a spear to harvest fossils and knock down structures. The real-time combat looks chaotic, forcing you to swap between party members on the fly to take advantage of their different weapon strengths while dodging attacks. You won't always have the same members in your party, as certain dungeons require tracking down specific wanderers to aid you.

From what was shown in the brief Nintendo presentation, the design looks reminiscent of Secret of Mana, with a vibrant world, larger-than-life bosses, and adorable characters roaming the lands. The gameplay loop between picking shops to build, finding materials, and fighting off baddies looks engaging. Hopefully, the game can keep a satisfying progression loop to keep players locked in for hours on end. At the very least the idea has plenty of potential. **» Kimberley Wallace**



NIER: AUTOMATA

50

A fresh coat of action without sacrificing its roots

Platform: PlayStation 4 **Style:** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** Platinum Games **Release:** Early 2017

In Square Enix's Nier: Automata, a proxy war rages between humans and robots in a dystopian world. As a sequel to the 2010 role-playing game, this new entry offers plenty of quirks the original had, with a deeper focus on action without sacrificing its RPG roots.

With the majority of humans having abandoned the planet, all that remains of this race is The Resistance, a group of individuals who remained on Earth to fend off robotic threats. Playing as the android 2B and her companion 9S, you aid the human race in this fight against these hostile mechanical beings.

Nier: Automata opens up its world to the player progressively as the story unfolds. One of these areas include The Resistance's settlement camp, which is surrounded by crumbling debris and huddling humans trying to stay warm around campfires. Here, you can upgrade weapons and purchase items. Another scene I was shown was a vast, barren desert that was overflowing with enemies; similar to shades hovering around the city in the past game. As you unlock these different environments, they become connected to one another, allowing you to seamlessly walk from one place to the next.

Because Nier: Automata is being developed by Platinum Games, the flow of combat is much smoother this time, similar to the likes of Bayonetta. In the brief demo I play, I must defeat an onslaught of robots in as little time as possible. I fluctuate between heavy and light attacks, then quickly evade attacks by holding down R2, which allows me to smoothly shift from side to side with ease. Switching between spiked gauntlets for melee and an impressive katana to slice up enemies, combat is both dynamic and fun. Weapons can be switched on the fly for others, as well. Additionally, a small robot that hovers over your head can be used as a controllable turret. You can use it to aim and shoot at enemies, or latch onto it to float in the air as a combative tactic.

Even with all these new refinements, Platinum Games hopes to continue the spirit of the original. The unique blend of genres from the last game is similarly appearing in Nier: Automata, along with the fishing mini-game (with some needed tweaks). Nier: Automata arrives in early 2017. **» Elise Favis**

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GAME OF THE MONTH

90 Inside

Playdead's first game, Limbo, released six years ago. We've been waiting a long time to get our hands on the studio's next project, and the final experience does not disappoint. Inside presents a world corrupted by scientific experimentation where humanity is a privilege, not a right. Seeing what is next and peeling back its mystery feels like a simulated nightmare, and it's an experience that won't soon be forgotten by those who see it to the end.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be dished in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Better than nothing.

AWARDS

gamerinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gamerinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gamerinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gamerinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Dangerous Golf

The creators of Burnout add more fuel to the fire

Style 1 to 4-Player Action (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Three Fields Entertainment
Developer Three Fields Entertainment **Release** June 3 **Rating** E

8

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Take a sledgehammer in the form of a golf ball to various environments

» Graphics
Seeing the number of objects around the room get crushed is satisfying, along with the various effects – from sparks to water to splatters

» Sound
The game has its own PlayStation 2–era theme song, which strikes the perfect chord during the similarly themed menu screens. The cacophony of smashes and sounds is also paired with synth choirs, toms, deep timpani, and assorted other aural punctuations

» Playability
The static camera on the tee shot means you can miss some of the resulting action

» Entertainment
Dangerous Golf is a battering ram and a ballet at the same time. You'll cackle with glee at the carnage and stew over missed opportunities

» Replay Value
High

Destruction in video games is often portrayed in one way: As violence toward other beings borne out of anger, fear, desperation, hatred, or general malevolence. Dangerous Golf takes destruction out of those contexts and makes it creative, liberating, and stimulating. The gameplay has accessible depth, balancing fundamental emotional needs of immediate gratification with deeper states of curiosity and engagement. Now, if you close your textbooks we can get down to the business of how to topple 18 antique suits of armor and two perched lion statues with a single flaming golf ball.

You start out with a tee shot in an area crowded with eminently breakable and often expensive items. A Hall of Mirrors at a French palace filled with magnums of champagne An Australian gas station with exploding pumps on the outside and well-stocked shelves of food on the inside An English manor with enough high-falutin' trimmings to make your upper lip get stiff No matter where you are, you're going to want to break everything.

The tee shot has no power or accuracy meters (the camera doesn't follow the ball on this shot, either, for some unfathomable reason), but it's not brainless either. Sometimes you're better off aiming behind you or using the laser-sight to knock over and break one item before the ball pings off on its way to somewhere else.

Most of the boards give you a Smashbreaker next, which lets you steer the ball using Halo-like warthog controls (steering by using the right analog to control the camera) and apply gas/brake with the triggers to slow or ramp up the ball's overall speed and bounciness. A Smashbreaker ball also has extra heft, allowing it to bust porcelain urinals and plow through bookcases. With pounding timpani accentuating its every bounce, you'd think that little fiery ball was almost enjoying itself.

The time your ball is in Smashbreaker mode is limited, so you want to end up near the pin, but not too close. The final putt isn't about getting it in the hole; it's about arranging a trick shot to get it there in style for bonus cash. During putts the ball is more like a homing missile, so if you approximate the angles you can pull off that high-value blind triple-bank shot and also destroy some more objects along the way.

Dangerous Golf straddles different lines to arrive at a difficult-to-achieve nexus of primal fun. The ball physics are natural enough to produce any number of unpredictable outcomes, though players have some – but not too much – control. The levels are open and inviting, but contain some carefully placed objects like mop buckets that can explode forward to trigger Rube Goldberg-like chain reactions for big dollars. You want to have a plan, but often the best scores and the biggest booms occur when you just go where the flaming ball bounces.

The many varied outcomes within each of the 100 holes is coupled with lots of depth layered on along the way. New areas open up on familiar holes. Bombs can be strategically planted and detonated after you sink your putt. Warp portals take you to new locations. Hazard areas or objects are instant death if they are hit. Multi-flag holes are a chance to really rack up the bucks. Pistol putts let you go airborne. Even objects in the environments have their own surprises. Red pepper boxes explode into instant Smashbreakers, crossbows fire off bolts that aid your cause, and a big-money Secret Stash bottle hides on every hole. I once got a surprise Smashbreaker when I somehow landed my ball pristinely on top of a car jack.

Dangerous Golf features couch co-op as well as buildable playlists for online competitive play, and you can play the entire career mode in co-op. Here you pass the controller, but instead of alternating individual shots, the second player goes the entire hole in the wake of the first player's debris. This creates a kind of friendly competition since the better the first player does, the less the second has to smash.

You're not going to find every feature you've ever wanted packed into Dangerous Golf, but what you will find is a title that nails its core gameplay concept. It lies somewhere between precision and randomness – a place where, not accidentally, a very charming heart resides.
» Matthew Kato

Mighty No. 9

A lifeless Mega Man clone

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Comcept **Release** June 21 **Rating** E10+

6

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Jump, shoot, and fight robot bosses. The premise has classic roots, but lacks the old-school charm

» **Graphics**
Most of the visuals are bland and strange in conception. The levels are particularly colorless, rarely offering anything that is even remotely interesting to examine

» **Sound**
Over-exaggerated voice acting clashes against a surprisingly bad soundtrack that rarely gives the player a pronounced beat to accompany play

» **Playability**
Beck's dash ability is a lot of fun to use. The bosses pose a great challenge, but the levels don't offer much excitement outside of laughing at the ineffective trashcan assailants

» **Entertainment**
The kind of nostalgic gaming that makes you want to play the original Mega Man games instead

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

If you are feeling nostalgic for Mega Man, dust off your NES or Super Nintendo; Mighty No. 9 is not the spiritual successor we wanted. It may look and play like Mega Man, but Comcept's robotic doppelganger doesn't have the heart of Capcom's Blue Bomber. A sparkless facsimile, Mighty No. 9 never captures the excitement or creativity of Mega Man's classic exploits.

Keiji Inafune and his development team at Comcept clearly put forth an effort to create a worthy successor. The appreciation this studio has for Mega Man can be seen through every second of play – and that's where it goes wrong the most. Too much of the content feels recycled, from enemies with shields to weapon designs coming close to being copied wholesale.

Unfortunately, none of the familiar content is as stylistic or lively as it once was. Mega Man's characters and artwork were consistent and unified; Comcept's take is largely pedestrian. A few enemy types are imposing and heavily armed – often pushing the player to dispose of them quickly – but a glut of foes mimic ordinary objects like trashcans and filing cabinets. Comcept could have turned anything into a robot – yet opted to go with the menacing trashcan.

Most of the visual content stands in stark contrast to protagonist Beck, a colorfully designed robot boy who just happens to be a hell of a lot of fun to control. Beaming with confidence, Beck has the ability to obliterate everything on the warpath. He can stun his foes, and quickly dash through them to earn bonuses like increased speed, defense, and a shot that penetrate foes for multiple hits. The dash mechanic is finely honed, and can be an absolute blast to use when enemies pose a great challenge, but those moments don't occur frequently enough in the standard stages.

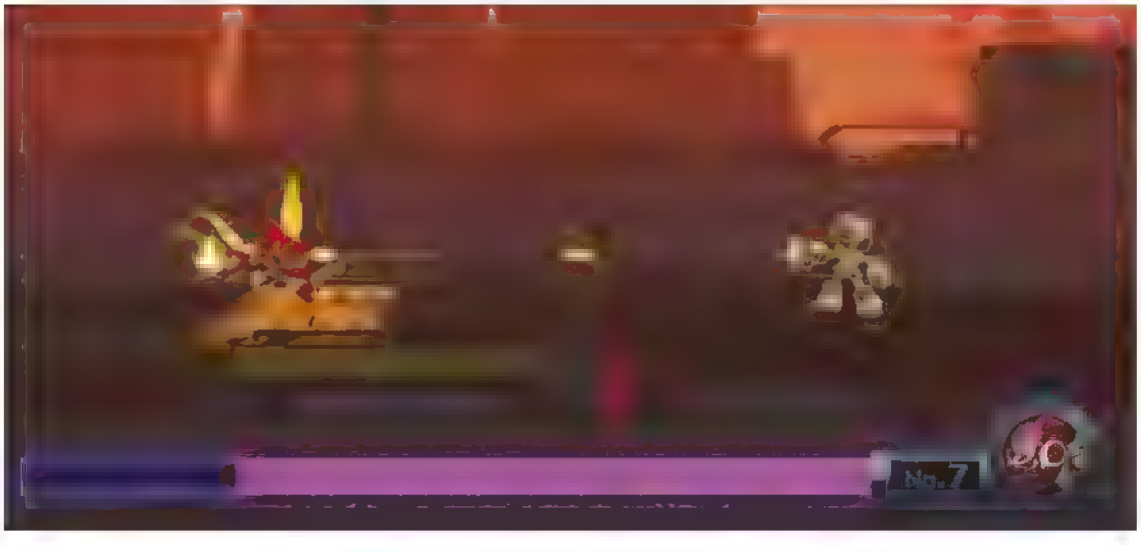
The level designs temper the excitement, and are largely uneventful until the boss encounter. One stage forces Beck to backtrack through previously conquered zones as he searches for a foe. Oddly, these areas don't repopulate with enemy encounters, and the whole sequence almost feels broken given how empty they end up being. Another stage appears to be designed with the dash mechanic in mind, as huge smokestacks crumble as Beck approaches, except he doesn't have to engage them, and can simply stand back and watch them fall.

Not all of the stages or moments within them are bad. Two stages in particular are good fun, but they come far too late in the game – after all of the standard boss stages are cleared. One of these levels forces you to repeatedly dash to stay airborne, a true test of skill. Another has Beck switching to enemy weapons for navigation purposes, producing enjoyable, puzzle-like elements of experimentation. I saw glimmers of greatness here, but they're often tucked between boring, by-the-numbers sections.

The one thing Comcept nails is the art of the boss fight. The robotic adversaries that Beck squares off against dish out punishment, and are fun to study and improve against. I defeated most of them by discovering weaknesses to specific weapons (think ice against fire), but I felt like I could take them all down with just my standard blaster. It almost makes me wish Comcept had left out the lackluster levels and made a game consisting of just bosses, because that's where Mighty No. 9 shines the brightest.

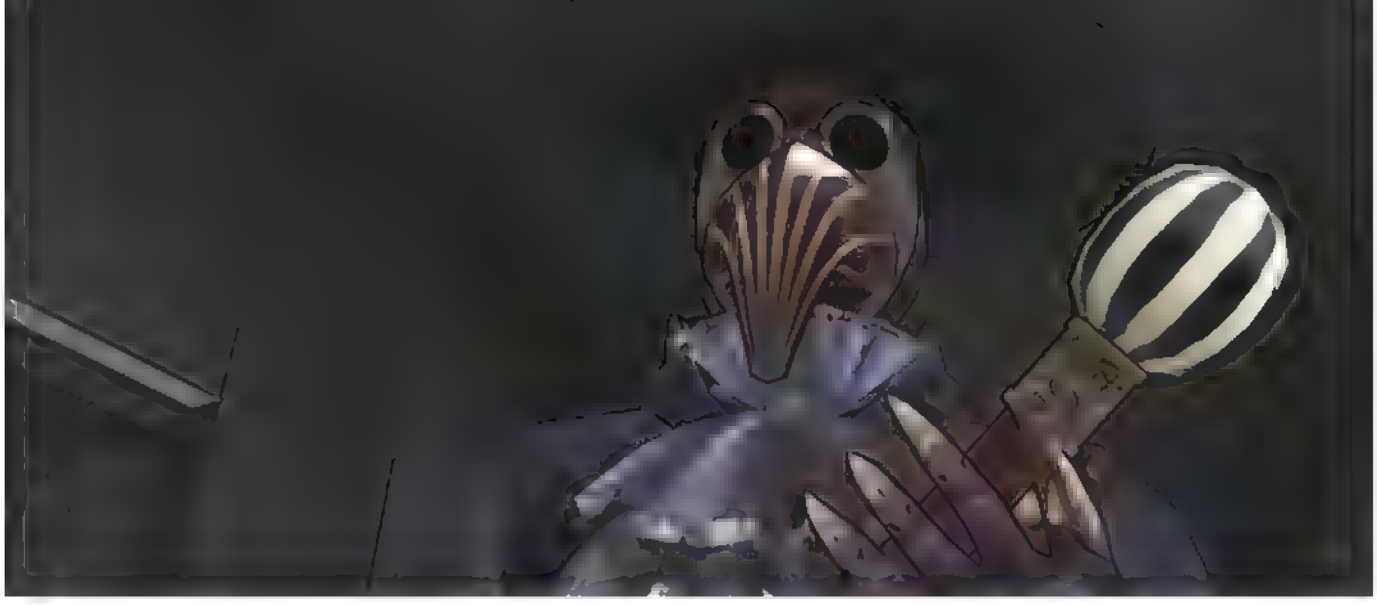
Similar praises cannot be sung of the final boss, which...well...I'll just come out and say is a spore-spewing plant. Outside of being an appropriately difficult encounter, this foe is so odd in design that it doesn't feel like a final fight. Given the lack of build up leading into this encounter, I was shocked that the game ended after this conflict. I thought for sure it was a mid-stage boss, and was anticipating another fight or stage after it, but was instead surprised by the rolling of credits.

Mighty No. 9 was supposed to be the game that sated our long-starved appetite for a new Mega Man entry, but it instead just made me want to play the old games again. I still think there's room in the gaming world for a new, classically designed Mega Man experience, but it can't just be a faceless and creatively sapped clone. Games like Shovel Knight feel more like a spiritual successor than this half-baked misstep. » **Andrew Reiner**



On Other Fronts

Mighty No. 9 is home to a wealth of optional content, ranging from racing challenges to a fun boss-rush mode. The harder challenges demand near flawless execution, and are a great test of the gameplay mechanics. You can hone your skills within them, but are purely on the side for those who want a greater challenge. Online cooperative play is also offered, but again is a small sampling of side content.



Zero Time Dilemma

A mind-bending adventure through a maze of death

8.75

gamerfarmer SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Aksys Games **Developer** Spike Chunsoft **Release** June 28 **Rating** M

3DS • Vita • PC

» Concept
Escape booby-trapped rooms and make hard decisions in this conclusion to the cult-favorite Zero Escape series

» Graphics
Character animations and environments are impressive, though clothing textures on characters are muddled

» Sound
The superb voice acting is often drowned out by loud background music on default settings, but you can tweak that with the volume slider

» Playability
The interface for the escape-the-room segments is easy to use, but puzzles can get taxing when you have to search every inch of a room for a necessary item

» Entertainment
Difficult puzzles and a bold, non-linear story structure will challenge your mind, and difficult moral decisions will test your heart

» Replay Value
High

The Zero Escape series has earned a reputation for inflicting mental anguish on players, combining the torturous mind games of *Saw* with Choose Your Own Adventure books to create an experience that puts players through the wringer. They are strange games that tackle complex theories about the paranormal and time travel, and refuse to break them down for easy understanding, but the challenge and peculiarities have attracted a cult following. Zero Time Dilemma, the third entry, retains those two key pillars while also serving as a more inviting and standalone title thanks to its focus on characters and its impressive non-linear structure.

The intro sequence quickly reveals the setup: The villain Zero, decked out in plague-doctor apparel, is keen on making his nine prisoners (divided into three teams of three) play twisted games to earn their survival. The prisoners are wearing bracelets that inject them with a drug that puts them to sleep and erases the last 90 minutes of their memory. Zero informs everyone that to escape, six of them must die. Each death reveals a passcode, and the final three survivors can use the passcodes to leave the facility, creating a scenario where it's in the best interest of these teams to kill each other. This creates an enjoyable and tense situation that forces you to choose how each team leader is going to react to the situation.

From there, the narrative plays out in non-linear fashion, with you selecting a team and then a random snapshot from a "fragments" menu in order to play out a scene from somewhere in the game that features that team. You can't tell where in the timeline you might be before you select that fragment and complete it. Fragments are usually composed of two stages. The escape phase has you trying to escape a room by solving intricate puzzles with objects that have been placed in the area, while the decision phase has you making a critical choice that results in a branch in the narrative. Your character might pull a lever causing the entire team to plummet to their deaths, resulting in an ending for that team. If you refrain from pulling the lever, maybe you are allowed to leave the room. The whole game is like this, with you jumping back and forth between teams and playing sections out of order.

This structure is confusing. It shouldn't work, but it does in ways that are constantly surprising and a joy to discover. Even earning a "bad" ending feels like you're making progress because of how the story is presented and how easy it is to dive back to a critical choice and see how it can play out differently. I can play through one fragment, screw up and watch my team of idiots perish, and rewind and undo the mistake. Instead of making my choices feel meaningless, it makes me feel powerful, and I'm constantly goaded by the little blank spots on my fragment flowcharts to play through every scenario to see every ending and possibility.

Zero Time Dilemma works best when it's at its weirdest, forcing players down strange narrative alleyways or making them scratch their heads over vexing puzzles. That said, a number of small aggravations diminish the charm. The escape-the-room phases have you searching the environment for necessary objects, but sometimes they are unreasonably tiny. You would never find them unless you just happen to be tapping over the area where they are, which is a bummer; I often wondered whether I was missing an integral piece of the puzzle without realizing it. And while this third game in a series with complex lore does a commendable job as a standalone title, a few conversations between characters returning from earlier games end up being little more than plot summaries used to help catch new players up to speed. Trying to help newcomers out isn't a bad idea, but the execution here is poor, with characters suddenly shifting from personal conversations into dull exposition. The silver lining is that these conversations contain nods to the previous games and work well as fan service – even if they bring the pacing to a halt occasionally.

These aggravations do little to damage Zero Time Dilemma when it lets you take control of this interactive story in engaging and memorable ways. The final chapter of the Zero Escape series is an excellent horror adventure both for fans and newcomers, allowing them to be storytellers in addition to players, defying time and fate to create their own twisted labyrinths. » Javy Gwaltney

Mirror's Edge Catalyst

A hop, skip, and a sophomore slump

Style 1-Player Platforming **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** DICE **Release** June 7 **Rating** T

6.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A follow-up to the unique first-person parkour simulation, but set in a barren open world

» **Graphics**
Mirror's Edge's modern minimalist art style returns, but a lack of detail makes this world feel desolate and lifeless

» **Sound**
Solid audio design helps orient you, but the soundtrack lacks defining characteristics

» **Playability**
The first-person platforming feels good, but the melee combat is a chore

» **Bottom Line**
This genre-blender experiments with the traditional sandbox formula, but fails to encapsulate the fun elements of an open world

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

The original Mirror's Edge wasn't perfect, but it felt like something new when it released in 2008. The violence-averse platformer had a modern artistic edge and intricately woven levels that offered multiple paths worth exploring. However, its defining characteristic was a first-person camera that let players experience the thrills of urban exploration directly from the protagonist's perspective. Fast forward to today, and first-person games are more diverse than ever. But Mirror's Edge still feels like an anomaly, seemingly leaving the field wide open for DICE's follow-up. Unfortunately, a sterile open world and excessive backtracking drain Catalyst of the fun found in the original.

Unlike the original Mirror's Edge, which played out through a series of linear levels, Catalyst is set within an open world of city rooftops. Like most open-world games, Catalyst is full of time trials, side missions, and other collectable trinkets that make a mess of the map screen. You can even create your own checkpoint courses and time trials in an asynchronous multiplayer element, which then appear in the games of your friends and strangers. Unfortunately, these time trials and most of the rest of the side content feels repetitive and boring. Catalyst's sterile false utopia is also largely unpopulated, and almost every area looks like one you've previously explored.

Not only are your surroundings uninteresting, but the open-world structure doesn't mesh well with Mirror's Edge's gameplay. A few fast-travel safe houses help mitigate backtracking, but there are only so many ways to leap or climb from one roof to the next, which means you climb the same drainpipes and ladders several dozen times.

Thankfully, some thrilling platforming moments await those who are willing to put up with Catalyst's antiseptic city of glass. Most of the main story missions take place in separate environments, which feel more like the levels from the first game. One of my favorite moments had me bounding though a construction yard and narrowly avoiding turret fire while sliding under a series of sawhorses and discarded machinery. During another memorable moment, I was forced to leap blindly off a skyscraper and ride a drone down to safety. Finding the right flow through a level is the game's best selling point. I felt like an Olympic athlete every time I launched off a railing then performed two wall runs that kept my momentum going so I could land on an otherwise unreachable ledge. For the most part, the platforming feels great, and I only experienced a few moments were Faith failed to run across a wall or leapt over something I hadn't expected.

As Faith completes missions or bests her friends' time trials, she earns experience that unlocks upgrades within her climbing, gear, and combat experience trees. Most of these are basic improvements like bonus damage to certain enemies or the ability to save momentum by rolling after a big drop. But you also earn new tools, such as a disruptor than can stagger enemies, and a grappling hook that attaches to fixed points to help you swing across large gaps. The grappling hook in particular is a nifty addition that changes up the flow of navigating through the city without making it incredibly easy to get everywhere.

When you perform well, you build up a "runner's shield," which makes it harder for enemies to hit you unless you slow down. I love how this encourages you to keep moving and avoid combat. When I was in the zone, I felt untouchable. Unfortunately, you can't run from all of your problems, and when Catalyst forces you to slow down and engage the enemy, the combat system breaks down. Faith only has a few simple combos which most of the harder enemies can easily counter. If Faith is moving at full speed, she can leap off objects and take out most enemies with a single drop attack, but getting your momentum going when you're cornered is difficult. I had more than a couple Benny Hill moments, where I led a train of enemies in circles as I tried to build up enough steam to leap into the air and take them out. The game doesn't force players into combat often, but when it does, I pray for an exit.

Catalyst contains several exciting platforming moments, but most of them are buried under repetitive world traversal and a mundane metropolis. The original Mirror's Edge is an overlooked gem from last generation, but even die-hard fans will have trouble finding the diamonds in this rough. » **Ben Reeves**

Faith has a few new upgrades such as a grapple hook, which helps her cross wide gaps.

Inside

An engaging interactive nightmare

9.75

gamefarmer PLATINUM gamefarmer GAME OF THE MONTH

Style 1-Player Action/Puzzle **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer Playdead **Release** June 29 **Rating** M

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Make your way through a nightmare where scientific experiments have created a warped, uncomfortable world

» Graphics
Muted colors, a clean aesthetic, and beautiful animation makes every moment worthy of a screenshot

» Sound
Music and sound effects are scarce. It makes the moments where orchestration appears (or a sound effect signals a sudden, violent death) stand out in an unsettling way

» Playability
Animations showcase an impressive level of fluidity and that extends into controlling the boy. I was always in total control and never missed my mark when it came to hitting a jump or grabbing a ledge

» Entertainment
Inside is the closest I have ever felt to experiencing a simulated nightmare. It's the perfect showcase of the kind of emotion an interactive experience can inspire

» Replay Value
Moderate

Playing through the closing moments of Inside, sitting in a dark room with my headphone volume raised high, I realized my mouth had been open for a while. It wasn't the first time I had an involuntary reaction to the game; Inside is an experience that makes you unsure and uncomfortable about the world you're visiting, leaving you with the feeling as though you just lived through a dream. I was transfixed from its opening moments, and my desire to move forward only grew stronger as I made my way through Inside's troubling world.

At first glance, Inside seems like a basic 2D platformer with puzzles, but its art direction, soundtrack, and ambiguous narrative all elevate it to something far more engaging. Much like Limbo (developer Playdead's previous title), Inside follows a boy through a mysterious world with only two inputs from the player: jump and interact. The boy is capable of climbing, swinging, swimming, moving platforms, and a few more surprise abilities I did not expect. Despite a seemingly small skillset, I never felt I didn't have everything I needed to navigate the environment.

Inside is like an interactive nightmare, but not in the same way a survival-horror game has the ability to make your palms sweat or effectively deliver a jump scare. Playing through Inside evokes the same feeling as a horrible dream – a dream where you have some control over its direction and everything makes sense in context, but the moment you step outside of it, everything falls apart and you're forced to ask yourself why it caused you to bolt upright in the middle of the night. It's a familiar and unnerving sensation, and Inside is the closest I have ever gotten to encompassing that feeling in a video game.

That disorienting and surreal quality is created by Inside's world, which is incredibly dangerous and oppressive, and every misstep leads to immediate death. Dogs chase after you with violent motivations, and search lights eject deadly wires that drag you into the sky the moment you step out of the shadows. Even the landscape design lends a foreboding nature to the world, with your path taking you through seemingly abandoned structures housing dangerous experiments. Whatever is still alive in this world has either completely lost its free will, or exists purely to show exactly why these scientific facilities have been abandoned. It makes the impetus to move the boy through the environment a powerful motivator. By the end of the game, I didn't fully understand why the boy did what I ultimately directed him to do, but I didn't feel cheated or without conclusion as a result.

The ambiguity of the strange world and the boy's mission lends to the dreamlike, out-of-body nature of the adventure; it helped me focus on how Inside made me feel, but you can still draw some conclusions. After completing the game, I immediately restarted, not in the hopes of discovering specific new plot details or alternate paths, but for the opportunity to experience the journey again.

The story is scant, free of dialogue and overt text, but is engrossing thanks to an expanding sense of dread and an ability to consistently one-up itself with each uncomfortable moment. It moves through a society that seems to have left its humanity behind in favor of technological advancement and is punctuated by small, often gruesome mysteries. Finding the answers to these implied questions (like "What's behind the glass?") is one of the main things that pulled me along.

Puzzles are consistently novel, never relying on over-complicating their initial hooks and are expertly implemented into the world. I never reached a clearly defined "puzzle section," as every obstacle is naturally integrated into the environment. Your challenges include figuring out the correct timing to outrun dogs, or moving an object in the way of a deadly obstacle – not pushing convenient boxes or pulling conspicuous levers. I repeated core actions periodically, like moving a platform in place for a jump or taking advantage of a strange device related to the zombie-like creatures that dot the backgrounds, but a small twist or change always guaranteed it felt new.

Inside has excellent gameplay, thoughtful puzzles, and deadly obstacles that are entertaining to avoid. However, the full experience is a strangely uncomfortable one, from its opening moments to a finale that left my mouth agape. The world's implied history immediately pulled me in, and it's an experience I can't put out of my head. My chest tightens as I recall the feeling of entering new areas, succumbing to surprise deaths and witnessing its many unexpected moments. By the end, I felt as though I had lived through someone's horrible dream, and I couldn't wait to do it all over again. » **Kyle Hilliard**

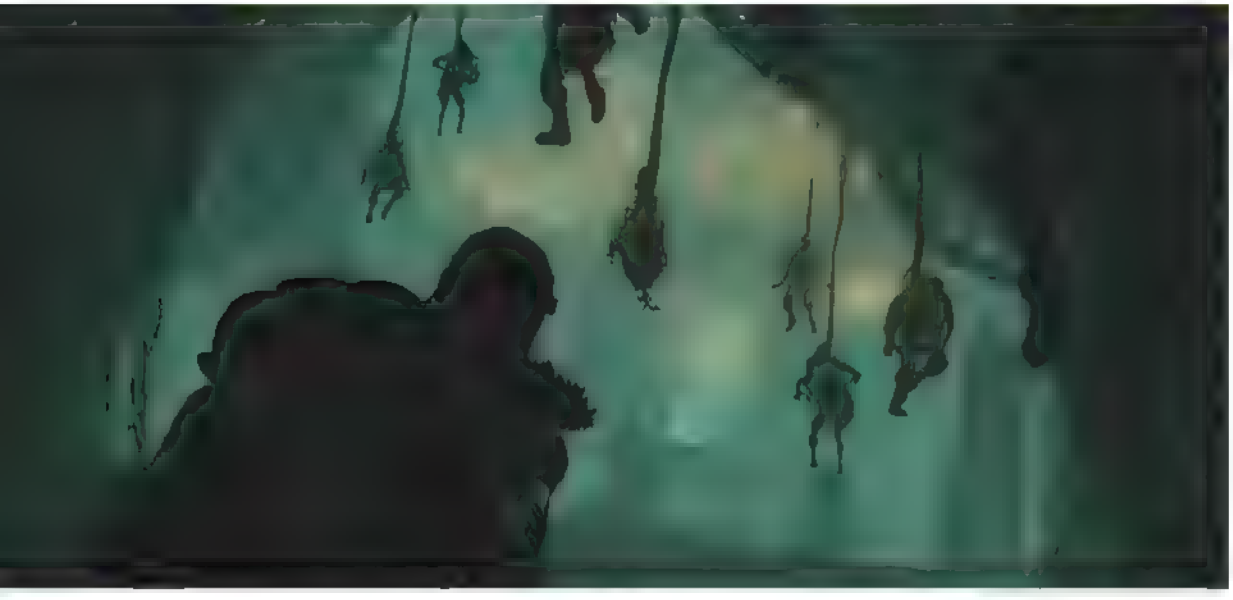
Edge Of Nowhere

A familiar tale of horror told with VR

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Oculus Studios **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** June 6 **Rating** NR

7.5

Rift



If Antarctica's subzero temperatures and falling ice don't kill you, then perhaps its native life will. No, I'm not talking about penguins, Edge of Nowhere's vision for the frozen continent is far more sinister, with tentacled grotesqueries torn from the pages of H.P. Lovecraft's stories and shoved right into your face thanks to Oculus Rift. Insomniac's survival-horror game doesn't redefine the genre, but it provides another fascinating – and unsettling – glimpse at VR's potential.

Victor Howard is part of a rescue team trying to find out what happened to a missing expedition that was exploring Antarctica's dark secrets. After his plane crashes, Howard's only hope is to meet up with the missing crew, which includes his romantic partner (and fellow explorer), Ava Thorne. Armed only with his wits, Howard catches sight of the crew's trail and plods ahead.

Considering the state of the trail, it's a wonder that crew managed to get anywhere. Rope bridges collapse unpredictably, and when Howard scales icy walls – thanks to scavenged climbing gear – the surface cracks and shatters beneath his axes. I've crossed more than my share of collapsing video game bridges over the years, but experiencing it in VR does breathe some fresh air into an otherwise stale mechanic. Drops of a few hundred feet aren't uncommon, and looking down from a precipice is exhilarating. The level geometry is simple (sometimes to a fault), but the sense of scale it brings is impressive.

Players don't experience the hazards through Howard's frosted goggles. Instead, they watch the action from a slight distance, as a third-person observer. Whether I was swiveling my head around to get a good look at the desolate expanse among the glaciers or instinctively tucking my neck in while navigating cave tunnels, Edge of Nowhere's atmosphere definitely sucked me in.

While battling the elements with some basic platforming and climbing puzzles, Howard soon discovers he's not alone. Something terrible is under the ice and in the caves deep within Antarctica, and it's been disturbed. The menagerie of foes is limited but effective, ranging from creepy St. Bernard-sized fleas that can be smashed with a single chop to monsters that might have trouble squeezing into a football stadium. You acquire a shotgun, but taking on foes head on isn't always a bright idea – even though blasting them apart is easy and satisfying. They're attracted to sound, and ammunition is limited. Instead, the smartest course of action is to throw rocks to distract the creatures and hopefully sneak past unnoticed.

That's easier said than done, thanks to the way stealth is handled. Most of the creatures rely on hearing, so rocks are invaluable. Monsters have a knack for getting randomly alerted, however, which gets frustrating. That makes navigating the stealth in some of the cave networks tricky, since it's hard to get a solid sense of your position in the world; you can't simply rotate the camera. You're meant to take your time and carefully watch your enemies, but unless you plan on playing on a barstool and spinning like a top, keeping track of everything can be a chore.

Howard uncovers journals along the way, which provide some backstory on what exactly happened during the previous expedition. Or, at least some form of backstory. Since this is Lovecraft-style horror (complete with nods to Miskatonic University), sanity is pliable. Players are thrust into a variety of insane set pieces, which made me question just about everything that had been shown to me. One moment you're trudging in the snow, the next you're in a lecture hall. Why are there balloons on the ceiling of this cave? Was there really an expedition? What happened to Ava before Antarctica? You can probably predict where things are going before the climax, but getting there is a weird and satisfying ride.

Insomniac does a great job of taking advantage of the sense of presence VR technology can bring, with sequences that put disturbing images up close for examination. The experience isn't about jump scares; it's about making you dread what's ahead, rather than trying to make you soak your seat. It's not revolutionary, but Edge of Nowhere is a rewarding way to spend an afternoon. Just be sure to crank the AC.

» Jeff Cork

» **Concept**
Recover the secrets of a missing Antarctic expedition, while possibly losing your sanity along the way

» **Graphics**
Quality varies wildly, with stunning moments alongside flat and amateurish-looking terrain

» **Sound**
The eerie music and ambient sounds are a testament to what the Rift's headphones can pump out

» **Playability**
The stealth can be the stuff of nightmares, with finicky detection and occasional difficulty knowing where exactly you are

» **[illegible]**
Is it reason alone to buy into VR? Probably not. But if you've taken the plunge, it's worth spending a few hours losing your mind

» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE

Over-the-top and plenty of J-pop fun

8.25

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Atlus **Release** June 24 **Rating** T

» Concept
Bring the Shin Megami Tensei and Fire Emblem universes together to stop evil beings called Mirages from corrupting figures in the entertainment industry

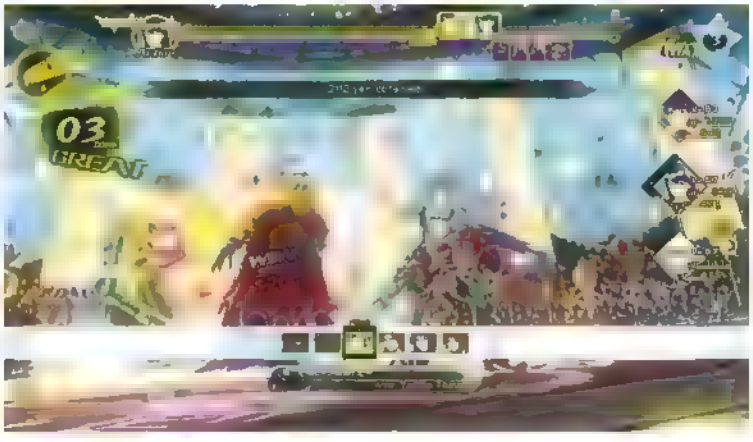
» Graphics
The creative monsters, authentic Japanese districts, and character models all look great, but the graphics are dated and dungeons lack environmental detail

» Sound
The soundtrack is uplifting and fitting, emphasizing big story moments. The game only includes Japanese voice work, but that didn't bother me given the game's focus on Japanese culture

» Playability
The concepts are easy to grasp, and the game controls well. When striking enemies, the camera is much improved from Atlus' previous efforts in SMT IV and Persona 4

» Entertainment
From its charming cast to the battle system that makes it into one big performance, Tokyo Mirage Sessions is zany in the best way possible

» Replay Value
Moderate



Crossover games have a tendency to be silly in order to make two disparate universes collide. Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE is no exception, combining the worlds of Shin Megami Tensei and Fire Emblem into one heavy dose of Japanese popular culture, ranging from pop stars and actors to fashion and anime. This unique experience merges the two long-running franchises together in interesting ways, since anything goes; you fight by performing songs to damage enemies, wearing elaborate costumes on a vibrant stage. With a colorful cast, fun upgrade system, and challenging battles, Tokyo Mirage Sessions provides an entertaining performance through and through.

The amusing (and predictable) plot has sinister Mirages taking control of renowned performers, stealing their creative energy to fuel evil deeds. You play as Itsuki, an ordinary high-school student who notices something is awry when his best friend Tsubasa enters a singing competition and members in the audience start disappearing, opening a portal to the mysterious Idolasphere. The story has a good mix of humor and tender moments, from helping Tsubasa gain confidence in herself to achieve her pop-star dreams to dealing with your drunk talent agent and anime-obsessed instructor.

The Fire Emblem characters come in by lending their powers to the main cast to stop the baddies. For instance, Fire Emblem Awakening's Chrom provides Itsuki a slew of sword attacks. The most interesting parts of the story come later when you start piecing together why the Fire Emblem characters are in this different world, since they have no memory of how they got there. The story is self-contained, so even if you don't have experience with either series you can still follow along. The gameplay leans more toward SMT's traditional RPG gameplay; don't expect the strategy battles or relationship system Fire Emblem is known for.

Everything revolves around the entertainment premise, including the dungeons and battle system. You trek through themed landscapes, often focused on modeling and TV programming. While I liked having dungeons related to different aspects of entertainment, they could be more interesting to explore. Every dungeon has some main puzzle mechanic, but the puzzles are often tedious, requiring backtracking for tasks like pulling switches on opposite sides of a room or going through doors in a specific order. You're also dealing with enemy encounters during the process, which slows you down even more. Mirages appear on screen and lunge at you quickly, so they're often hard to avoid. Though you gain a skill to temporarily turn off battles, I hated having to constantly cast it whenever I needed to figure out my route.

The turn-based battle system focuses on exploiting enemy weaknesses, which will be familiar to anyone who has played a Persona or SMT game. However, in Tokyo Mirage Sessions, when you hit an enemy weakness, you trigger combos with party members who have skills that complement it. I enjoyed the battle system, especially how it progresses. Characters learn extra skills that spontaneously activate, making attacks hit more than one enemy, or even team-up for special performances that damage the enemy and add perks like status ailments or healing. Unfortunately, the grinding necessary to reach recommended levels for bosses made the combat lose some of its magic.

Some of my favorite features have nods to Fire Emblem, especially the upgrade system. You can master and craft various weapons that open up new skills, but only equip a certain number at once. When you get to a certain level, you can even change to a more powerful class using a Master Seal just like in Fire Emblem. As a fan of both franchises, I was disappointed by the sparse connections to Fire Emblem, this game loses its strategy-focused gameplay altogether and its characters are ancillary, not getting much screen time until the final story beats.

When you're not in battle, you can walk around various locations in Tokyo such as Shibuya and its famous Harajuku district. They're not exact 1:1 recreations, but they get the basic atmosphere down with convenience stores and vending machines around every bend. Various side quests also incorporate fun stuff about Japanese culture, such as tracking down exclusive anime memorabilia and watching silly TV shows with premises like a girl changing her personality when she sneezes. This attention to detail creates a powerful sense of culture and place, which works well to make the characters' everyday interactions believable.

Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE is a solid RPG with its own unique style and appeal. I could do without the tedious dungeons, but I still found plenty to love about the zany ride.

• Kimberley Wallace

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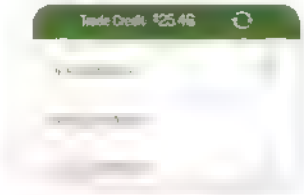

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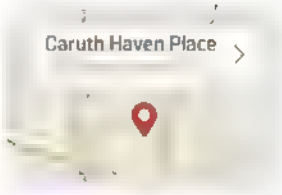

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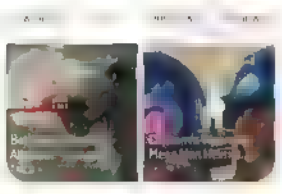

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Alienation	7.75	Jul-16
Atelier Sophie: The Alchemist Of The Mysterious Book	8	Jul-16
Battleborn	6	Jul-16
Dark Souls III	9.25	May-16
Day of the Tentacle Remastered	8.25	Jun-16
Dirt Rally	8.5	May-16
Division, The	8	May-16
Doom	8.75	Jul-16
Enter the Gungeon	8.5	Jun-16
Far Cry Primal	8.75	Apr-16
Firewatch	7.75	Apr-16
Hitman: Episode 1	6	May-16
Homefront: The Revolution	4	Jul-16
King's Quest, Chapter 3 – Once Upon A Climb	8	Jul-16
Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 5: Order Up	7	Jun-16
MLB The Show 16	8	Jun-16
Odin Sphere Leifthrasir	8	Jul-16
Overwatch	10	Jul-16
Plants vs. Zombies, Garden Warfare 2	8	Apr-16
Ratchet & Clank	8.25	Jun-16
Salt & Sanctuary	8.5	Jun-16
Stories, The Path of Destinies	7.75	Jun-16
Street Fighter V	7.25	Apr-16
Trackmania Turbo	7.5	Jun-16
UFC 2	8.5	May-16
Uncharted 4: A Thief's End	9.5	Jul-16
Unravel	7.75	Apr-16
Walking Dead: Michonne – Episode 2: Give No Shelter, The	6	Jun-16
Walking Dead: Michonne – Episode 3: What We Deserve, The	8	Jul-16
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine, The	9.25	Jul-16

XBOX ONE

Dark Souls III	9.25	May-16
Dirt Rally	8.5	May-16
Division, The	8	May-16
Far Cry Primal	8.75	Apr-16
Flame in the Flood, The	9	Apr-16
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PLAYSTATION 3

Minecraft: Story Mode, Episode 5 – Order Up	7	Jun-16
Odin Sphere Leifthrasir	8	Jul-16
Walking Dead: Michonne Episode 2 Give No Shelter, The	6	Jun-16
Walking Dead: Michonne Episode 3 What We Deserve, The	8	Jul-16

XBOX 360

Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 5 – Order Up	7	Jun-16
Walking Dead: Michonne – Episode 2: Give No Shelter, The	6	Jun-16
Walking Dead: Michonne Episode 3 What We Deserve, The	8	Jul-16

WII U

Pokkén Tournament	7	May-16
Star Fox Zero	6.75	Jun-16

PC

Adr1ft	8	May-16
Ashes of the Singularity	6.75	Jun-16
Banner Saga 2, The	8.5	Jun-16
Battleborn	6	Jul-16
Dark Souls III	9.25	May-16
Day of the Tentacle Remastered	8.25	Jun-16
Division, The	8	May-16
Don't Starve: Shipwrecked	7.25	Jun-16
Doom	8.75	Jul-16
Enter the Gungeon	8.5	Jun-16
Far Cry Primal	8.75	Apr-16
Firewatch	7.75	Apr-16
Flame in the Flood, The	9	Apr-16
Hearthstone Whispers Of The Old Gods	9.25	Jul-16
Hex: Shards of Fate	8.75	Apr-16
Hitman: Episode 1	6	May-16
Homefront: The Revolution	4	Jul-16
Hyper Light Drifter	9.5	Jun-16
King's Quest, Chapter 3 Once Upon A Climb	8	Jul-16
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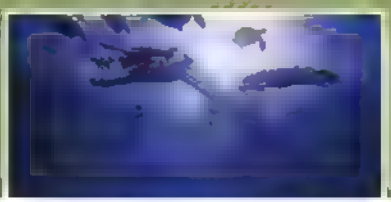
Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2	8	Apr-16
Pony Island	7.5	Apr-16
Quantum Break	8.5	May-16
Salt & Sanctuary	8.5	Jun-16
Stardew Valley	8.75	May-16
Stellaris	8.25	Jun-16
Stephen's Sausage Roll	8	Jul-16
Stories: The Path of Destinies	7.75	Jun-16
Street Fighter V	7.25	Apr-16
Total War: Warhammer	8.75	Jul-16
Trackmania Turbo	7.5	Jun-16
Unravel	7.75	Apr-16
Walking Dead: Michonne – Episode 2: Give No Shelter, The	6	Jun-16
Walking Dead: Michonne – Episode 3: What We Deserve, The	8	Jul-16
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine, The	9.25	Jul-16
XCOM 2	9.5	Apr-16

RIFT

Chronos	8.5	Jun-16
Climb, The	5.75	Jul-16

the score



6 | Time Machine VR

Platform Rift, Vive **Release** May 19 **Rating** T

I enjoyed the more dangerous moments in the campaign, but the scales are tipped too far to the academic side. If you're looking for a distinct interactive way to learn about prehistoric creatures of the deep, that's exclusively what Time Machine VR accomplishes. – *Brian Shea*

7.75 | Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 6: A Portal To Mystery

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC, iOS
Release June 7 **Rating** E10+

Regardless of my curiosity surrounding Telltale's future plans for the series, A Portal to Mystery is a fun and refreshing episode of a series that has recently shown signs of fatigue. – *Brian Shea*

8 | 1979 Revolution: Black Friday

Platform PC **Release** April 4 **Rating** NR

Though poorly designed action sequences and occasional technical shoddiness drag the whole experience down, 1979 Revolution: Black Friday is a quality adventure game that tells a gripping story about people struggling to survive the times and bring about change. – *Javy Gwaltney*

5 | Star Ocean: Integrity And Faithlessness

Platform PS4 **Release** June 28 **Rating** T

Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness makes too many missteps to forgive. In a generation where RPGs are pushing the boundaries with better storytelling and unique worlds, this just isn't going to cut it. – *Kimberley Wallace*

Visit gameinformer.com/mag for the full reviews

Eve: Valkyrie	6.25	Jun-16
Lucky's Tale	6.5	Jun-16
Radial-G	6.5	Jun-16

VITA

Audioshield	8	Jun-16
Job Simulator: The 2050 Archives	6.5	Jun-16
Lab, The	6.25	Jun-16

3DS

Bravely Second: End Layer	7.5	Jun-16
Fire Emblem Fates: Birthright	9.25	Apr-16
Fire Emblem Fates: Conquest	9.25	Apr-16
Fire Emblem Fates: Revelation	8	May-16
Hyrule Warriors Legends	8	May-16
Kirby: Planet Robobot	8	Jul-16

VITA

Atelier Sophie: The Alchemist Of The Mysterious Book	8	Jul-16
Day of the Tentacle Remastered	8.25	Jun-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 5: Order Up	7	Jun-16
Odin Sphere Leifthrasir	8	Jul-16
Salt & Sanctuary	8.5	Jun-16
Severed	8.5	Jun-16

iOS

Clash Royale	8	May-16
Hearthstone: Whispers Of The Old Gods	9.25	Jul-16
Minecraft: Story Mode Episode 5 – Order Up	7	Jun-16
Walking Dead: Michonne – Episode 2 Give No Shelter, The	8	Jun-16
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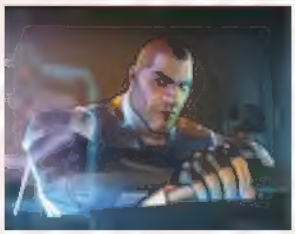
E3 MISSING IN ACTION

E3 continues to be the place where the biggest games are revealed, shown, and – of course – played. There are always a few previously announced games that are noticeably absent, however. Here are some of the biggest no-shows at this year's event.

by Jeff Cork



Crackdown 3

We got to play the game's mayhem-embracing multiplayer mode at Gamescom last year, but it was nowhere to be seen at this year's E3. As one of only a handful of games designed to take advantage of Microsoft's processing cloud, it would have been a good reminder of that functionality.

Dead Island 2

Sumo took over development of the open-world zombie game from Yager one year ago, but it apparently wasn't ready to show its progress. Series originator Techland moved on with Dying Light, which certainly raised the stakes.

Two irresistible flavors

Winner Chocolate Category. Survey of 40,000 people by TNS

Final Fantasy VII Remake

Square dropped this bombshell (and plenty of jaws) when it announced that it was finally giving one of the all-time best RPGs an HD makeover. Considering how long we've been waiting for it, we've learned to be patient. That didn't make its absence any less disappointing.

Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom

Bandai Namco announced it was working on a sequel to the anime-style RPG at last year's PlayStation Experience, and then…nothing. The PS4 isn't suffering from a shortage of RPGs, but the original has a passionate fan base who would have appreciated an update.

Resident Evil 2 Remake

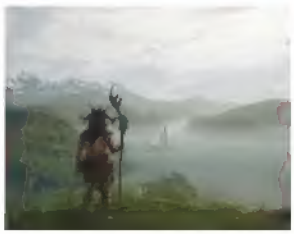
Capcom revealed Dead Rising 4 and Resident Evil 7 at E3, but that's not the end of the company's zombie roster – it's working on a remastered version of Resident Evil 2. Either we're at peak zombie, or it's another case of not being ready for public consumption.

Kingdom Hearts III

We've been eagerly looking forward to Sora's continuing adventures for years, and were hoping to learn more during the show. Unfortunately, our Keyblades will have to remain sheathed for a little longer.

No Man's Sky

Hello Games' open-universe space game has been a staple at shows for years, but it didn't make it into E3 2016's orbit. The game was delayed again to early August, and it's likely that Hello Games is too busy ensuring it hits the date to send valuable staff over to show off the game.



Wild

Michel Ancel's upcoming game gives players a chance to live as an animal-taming shaman in a primitive world. It seems we're going to have to wait in our caves a bit longer before we can ride a bear.

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